

Tales from Taranaki

Many will recall "Me and Gus" on radio in the 1950s, but few will have read of their subsistence farm existence. It is years since the stories were published in any form and now, 50 years after the author's death, they are to be given a new lease of life. David Young reports.

AMID THE harshness of untamed, central Taranaki in the 1920s were the Ngere Gardens. Crowds of picnickers in Sunday best would come from miles around in gig and car to ride the watershute into the duckpond and moon about on row-boats under bridges.

There were monkeys capering around the rosebushes and cabbage trees and . . . *a live emu*. You could watch yourself go fat or thin before distorting mirrors too. And the Wanganu Garrison band, in dark blue uniforms and white shoulder belts, made music, pumping "Invercargill" from their brass.

Today the bloom is off the gardens, but down the road in the Midhurst pub there are many old people, some hale octogenarians, who still recall the resort's pleasures.

Quickening their memories, is a new book, *Gus Tomlins**, a collection of Frank S. Anthony's once popular *Me and Gus* stories and, inside the same covers, a previously unpublished novel of his centred on the same two characters. The publishers have chosen to release the book as near as possible to those gardens and, more particularly, "pastures" where the two farmers on whom Gus and Mark are modelled lived out their *hopes and heartaches*.

Like nearly all Anthony's Taranaki tales, Gus's irrepressible optimism and Mark's reluctant co-operation provide hilarious comic climaxes. The romantic denouement of the incidents he describes in the gardens is no exception.

Their lack of success as gallants in gumboots is exceeded only by their hopelessness in the more grim business of making a go of farming. The apportioning of their land, under a rehabilitation scheme for returning World War One soldiers, was a monstrous practical joke perpetrated by the Massey Government. But Anthony, in his writing during and about those times, saw through his poverty to the joke of it all. His neighbour Charlie Carroll (Gus) helped the laughter flower into legend.

Carroll's youngest son Rex, a strapping, ruddy-cheeked farmer, works 340 acres on Denbigh Rd, which takes in Anthony's original 76 acres and Gus's 100 acres. "I can still show you paddocks full of rata—I don't know how they made a living. A lot of it is just hard, hard country that only grows lotus major, and is very wet." Even his memories of his father's work are more consistent with quarrying than farming. Egmont in some distant aeon had spewed massive boulders across the country-side. He remembers entire days set aside for spalling a single rock—tapping a hole for explosives and then blowing it up. As the stories suggest, there was plenty of stumping to be done too. Harsh country, that produced indifferent milk in wretched quantities.

GUS TOMLINS, Oxford and Auckland University Press, \$8.50 Hb, \$5.60 Pb.

It is the sifting of the legend from the facts that we townie people, from the media, book trade and university, are interested in. If politeness holds our curiosity in check it is only briefly. The Taranaki people receive our questions with great warmth—the book launching event spills memories like seed from a pod on a hot summer's day.

"You'd never be sure whether he was serious or not," the Mayor of Stratford, Leo Carrington, says of Carroll. "He had one of the best blackberry farms in New Zealand. After milking, his cows would have to go down a race and into the river. He always said it kept the cows clean." A real gentleman, he was, says Carrington, and absolutely true to character in the stories.

Information on Anthony is not quite so forthcoming. Like Ronald Hugh Morrison, his fellow provincial down the line at Hawera, Anthony, after insignificant recognition as a writer, died a bachelor at quite an early age. Consumption took him at 35 after he had sold his farm and gone to write in Britain. He left a kerosene case full of manuscripts. Some were published in the 1930s and they enjoyed considerable popularity in re-shaped form as radio broadcasts in the 1950s.

So Anthony's part at the function is represented by his sisters' descendants and his old acquaintances.

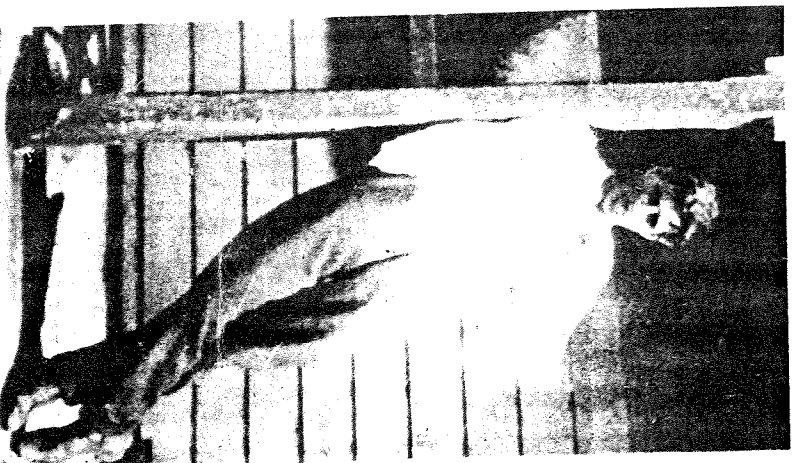
"He was very quiet, very thin, with a long nose," says 83-year-old farmer Joseph Schumacher. "He was a nice chap. I used to speak to him down at the factory—but you had to pump him all the time."

In contrast to Anthony, the late Charlie Carroll lived on in improving health to produce a veritable tribe of robust sons, a daughter and numerous grandchildren. Guest of honour is Carroll's smiling widow, now failing in eyesight but acute in recollection. Younger than her husband by some years, she met Anthony on two occasions only, which seems to scotch the speculation that she is one of the heroines immortalised in his prose.

She says that laughter was the prime bond of friendship between the two men. "They came back from the war, they were both hard up and for both it was their first venture in farming. Anthony had a crushed chest, Gus came back from the war with malaria, so they both knew illness too."

Seated beside Mrs Carroll is a spirited old lady whose naturally affectionate nature betrays slight hesitancy in the presence of journalists. "You see, I am the 'Alice' in *Follow the Call*," she explains. That novel (published by Auckland-Oxford two years ago) is a story of a young farmer's unrequited love. And Alice in spurring the attentions of Mark Woodford, is hardly the nicest person to know, suggests the lady, Phyllis Carroll.

She describes herself as a "shallow" person, but hers is the



Frank S. Anthony—his "Me and Gus" stories now part of our history.

blush of adolescence recalled. "I had no feelings for Mr Anthony and he was a very persistent man. He would meet my parents at church and my mother would bring him round."

After "an unhappy love affair" (with someone else) she went to England to stay with an aunt and Anthony, having sold his farm, tried unsuccessfully to woo her there.

So for some, the evening has an introspective edge as the past is inevitably paraded and the dead writer's stories mulled—who fits where?

Not far from Phyllis is her husband, Gus's brother Val Carroll, a stern patriarch, as weathered as an old fence batten. He tells with affection stories of the hi-jinks the celebrated pair indulged in. But one is conscious that for him, too, the evening provides a gentle nudge from history. Here is his wife's (rather innocent) youth unclesetled.

He betrays his misgivings when he says that in real life it was Anthony who was the aggressive personality while my brother was quiet". This is a reversal of roles in the stories, where always the effervescent Gus proposes while long-suffering Mark disposes.

Significantly, no one else at the evening shares old Carroll's biographical analysis. Even Gus's wife says that the respective personalities were faithfully depicted.

"Anthony had ideas that weren't really workable," she says kindly. "He didn't really understand farming."

Everyone agrees, too, that if Anthony had a flaw, then it was his bashfulness in the presence of what

the stories would have called the fairer sex. "Not everyone got on with him, particularly women," says Val Carroll. "He could knock out a really good tune on a violin but he couldn't dance."

His wife adds that dancing with Anthony was a most awkward experience. In those days, being a poor dancer was as socially ostracising for a male as not owning a car is today.

In story after story Anthony confirms his sense of inadequacy as Mark, tossed over by women, retreats to the end of the dancehall and the comfort of his pipe.

How good is the telling by today's standards? Anthony is a superb raconteur who creates interest, as editor Terry Sturm writes in the foreword. "Out of everyday occurrences, he needs few literary devices to hold his reader; a strong sense of irony serves him well. Certainly the innocent era which evoked a gentle, innocent era which hasn't disappeared entirely.

The main fault of the stories is their predictability and a certain archness in the style. They rely, too, on a number of now discredited stereotypes, especially in their handling of male-female relations. However, this does not inhibit the laugh-aloud humour which they inspire.

Auckland University Press's Professor Bill Pearson believes that the stories, and especially the "new" novel, deserve more serious critical attention than Anthony has attracted until now. "They provide a bridge between Sargeson and Mulgan on the one hand and earlier New Zealand literature on the other," he says.

"One can also see a relationship to Henry Lawson. I'm sure he read Lawson," says Pearson, as he pours another beer. "I'm sure he preferred popular writers, but not 'popular' in the bad sense."

In fact, Barry Crump, Fred Dagg and Peter Cape's "Down the Hall on a Saturday Night" all owe something to Anthony. But Anthony, says Pearson, belongs to a much more subtle tradition. The "Dagg" characters are vulgarised and narcissistic. "They say what nice people we are."

"Anthony is saying something rather different—that life is never as easy as we would like it to be."

For this reason, he feels that the altered radio scripts also failed the author's original intention.

Whether the stories are mainstream NZ Lit or just an important part of the catchment area matters less to readers than the fact that they are fun to read—the more lively writing of the novel especially. They are also now a part of our history.

Although Anthony and Carroll are gone, something of their humorous spirit endures. Out of the wet Taranaki night to the pub comes a New Plymouth newspaperman. "I don't know anything about this function," he breathes. "I understand it's to do with Midhurst's greatest writer." Then, fumbling for his camera: "Is he here tonight?"