Book Review

A humane life

Jackson's Track Memoir of a Dreamtime Placeby Daryl Tonkin & Carolyn Landon, Viking Books ISBN 0-670-88332-8

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Jackson's Track is a remarkable story of ordinary Australian people—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—living together under difficult circumstances. It is a story of rural life that is rarely told. It is narrated through the eyes of a man whose account testifies to his personal humanity, and sensitivity to those whose lives he touched.

The book tells of Daryl Tonkin's life at Jackson's Track in the Gippsland region of south-eastern Victoria. He and his older brother Harry arrived there in 1936, when Daryl was 17, after working on the north Queensland cattle routes. They headed for the rich temperate forests of Gippsland, in the Great Dividing Range south-east of the state capital Melbourne. There some of the largest eucalyptus trees in Australia grew. The brothers bought 550 acres of deserted farmland and regrowth forest. As it was the Great Depression no money changed hands; instead, the brothers were obliged to work off the debt.

They established a timber mill. With axes and cross-saws they falled (according to the book the forest men always said falled, rather than felled) the huge hardwood trees of the Gippsland forests.

The men who worked with them hailed from all over the country. One of these bush workers was an Aborigine, Stewart Hood, who had been driven out of a church-run mission station for opposing the authorities. The brothers decided to help him and collected his family to bring them to live on the property.

Word soon got around to various Aboriginal communities that at Jackson's Track there were “plenty of work, good water and firewood, plenty of game to be had”. Aborigines from all over Victoria began turning up. For two decades, up to 150 Aborigines lived there.

The Tonkin brothers had a core of workers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who worked with them on their mill, and an amicable relationship developed with the Aboriginal people living on the Track. Those who wanted paid work could chop wood on a piecework arrangement while those who didn't want to work were under no obligation to do so.

Eventually Daryl fell in love and set up camp with one of Hood's daughters, Euphemia. This led to a rupture between the brothers. While Harry was happy to work with Aborigines, he felt it wasn't proper to live with them. The brothers' sister Mavis, who by this stage was residing with them and was particularly concerned about public opinion, egged him on.

After a few months Harry tried to resolve the issue by abducting Euphie, taking her to relatives in another town. Daryl just brought her back. In typical fashion, however, he respected his brother's wishes by setting up camp just outside their property in the neighbouring state forest. The tension created by the opposition to his relationship grew to the point that he finished working for the timber mill and set up his own business, cutting fence posts for surrounding farms.

In 1957 Harry and Mavis decided to take over a timber yard at the coast near Melbourne and Harry invited Daryl to take over the running of the mill on their property and become their supplier. From this point the brothers began to develop a rapprochement which was unfortunately cut short by Harry's early death from a brain tumour.

For over two decades Daryl and the Aboriginal community lived in relative peace. But by the late 1950s, changes were taking place in the rural economy. Powerful social forces made themselves felt around Jackson's Track. Developers wanted to open up the area for large-scale farming and the local shire council decided to pave and straighten the track by cutting through Daryl's property, despite his objections. Suddenly the Aboriginal huts that had been nestled in the privacy of the bush were exposed to the road and the gaze of passing traffic.

In 1957 the state government established a new body called the Aboriginal Welfare Board to oversee the Aboriginal community. Its function was to “promote the moral, intellectual and physical welfare of Aborigines ... with a view to their general assimilation into the general community.” Next came the Aborigines (Housing) Act, proclaimed in 1959, which provided the Aboriginal Welfare Board with houses in towns and urban areas.

Soon discussions with the Jackson's Track residents became ultimatums. The shire and church authorities decided to bulldoze the huts. They gave the occupants a week to leave, while promising them new homes with all amenities in local towns. Those who stayed behind were transported to a four-acre paddock where church volunteers had built a single two-roomed house. Six families were expected to live there with no toilets or electricity. Others were housed in tents.

Eventually these families were allocated accommodation in the surrounding towns. Within two years many of the elders from the Jackson's Track community were dead. Alcohol became a major problem for the surviving families.

Daryl, his immediate family and the mill workers stayed on but the heart had been taken from the property. About one year later, in the depths of his despair, he agreed to sell the bulk of his land, not

imagining that anyone could fundamentally change the character of the environment because of the magnitude of the forests. However within two years the trees had been bulldozed down and the area completely cleared.

Daryl writes: “When I agreed on the clearing, I had forgotten what it was like to live out in the open away from the protection of the trees. The wind blew and we felt its chill in our very bones. The rain beat down on the roof of the house, and the hail. As the season turned warmer, the unfiltered sun turned everything to dust. The earth cracked under our feet and grit ground in our teeth, our skin blistered and hardened. The birds disappeared. I had never dreamed it would go like this. I thought there would always be bush.”

Daryl Tonkin still lives on Jackson's Track although the community has spread across Victoria. He and Euphie had 12 children, if I counted correctly. Several became state badminton champions while another Aboriginal child born on the property, Lionel Rose, became a world champion boxer.

The book was the result of collaboration between Tonkin and his grandchildren's English teacher, Carolyn Landon. Landon met the family while helping the children with their schoolwork and was asked to look at notes that Tonkin had written on his life. This led to a years-long effort where Tonkin talked and Landon took notes. In writing, she would also incorporate Tonkin's own jottings.

What moved me about the story was not just what is told but how it is told. Its style says much about the narrator and his subjects. There is an evenhandedness and understated character about the book. One feels that here is someone who is trying to look objectively at people and an environment for which he has great feeling.

Landon was concerned to reflect Daryl's character and tone. She says in her introduction that she tried to “create an individual human being out of words, Daryl's words. His thoughts, his philosophy, his sense of self would not be authentic without the right set of words.”

Much of the promotional material for the book focuses on the forbidden love between Daryl and Euphie and the conflict that it created. For myself, and one suspects for Daryl Tonkin, this is just one aspect of the broader and richer picture that he paints.

The real strength and beauty of the book are to be found in the descriptions and insights into the life of the Aboriginal community, the portrayal of the timber workers who worked alongside the Tonkin brothers and the local characters who lived in the region.

In the chapters on the Aboriginal communities, the book describes a society in transition—with the impact of 150 years of oppressive rule expressed alongside traditional practices and beliefs. In many ways, Jackson's Track provided a haven from the pressures of capitalist society. Aboriginal people could build their own shelters, hunt and gather food in the bush.

“Some were real barefoot bushmen, some were workers, some were hunters and trappers, some were craftsmen and some were lazy... Some were kind, some were responsible, some were selfish, some were larrikins, some were proud, some were cunning, some were gentle and innocent as lambs, some were mean as snakes.

“All of them had respect for the law, the blackfella law of tolerance and respect.

“The way the blackfellas arranged their lives did not always fit with the whiteman's values. Their idea of work was not always in terms of paid work. There were about a dozen men living on the track who never worked for money at all. They spent their time hunting through the bush. They were experts at snaring and trapping game and thus meat was plentiful and free to any of the woodcutters. The dogs were well fed, too. These men were an important part of the community. They were welcomed and respected anywhere.”

This portrait of surviving Aboriginal values underlines the destructiveness of the government policy of isolating Aboriginal families in suburbia. People whose existence had been, although not tribal, very communal were, in the new environment in the town, viewed with suspicion when their relatives or friends arrived and stayed for prolonged periods.

As Daryl puts it: “All the families were put on the Aboriginal pensions. They were given furniture and some food to get themselves started and told to look after themselves with their pensions. Another cruelty. These people had never lived in a situation where everything they had—food, drink, electricity, telephone, water, housing, clothing—had to be paid for. Before they lived on the track, most of them had come from mission stations where they weren't allowed to lift a finger to take care of themselves without being told what to do. At the Track they had taken care of themselves in the traditional way: they hunted for their food, they built their own houses, fetched their own water, collected their own fuel. They worked for their own money to pay for clothes and staples, taxis and entertainment if they wanted it.”

Life on Jackson's Track was not easy but the inhabitants were able to live in relative freedom and bring up their children in a healthy and caring environment. Its destruction was not an isolated event but part of a long history of dispossessions and betrayals of Aborigines throughout Australia.

Daryl had never wanted to think about social questions, preferring to take each person and situation as they came. This outlook left him unprepared for the social forces that threatened to overwhelm him and his loved ones. The book does not attempt to address the broader social processes at work but rather describes in tragic detail the impact of the government's policy of forced assimilation on the community at Jackson's Track.

I would recommend this book to any reader. Its writing style is deceptively simple but captivating. It is steeped in Tonkin's decency and concern for his fellow man.