

Paul Burke:

A wake for Tracker, larrikin Aboriginal leader: A personal response to Alexis Wright's *Tracker: Stories of Tracker Tilmouth*

(Sydney, NSW: Giramondo, 2017), 640 pp., PB \$39.95, ISBN 9781925336337

It is because of their 'larrikin streak' that Australians refuse to stand on ceremony ... To be a larrikin is to be sceptical and irreverent, to knock authority and to mock pomposity, engaging in a practice known as 'taking the mickey'—or more often, 'taking the piss'. To call someone a larrikin is also to excuse their bad behaviour, offering an affectionate slant on their disrespect for social niceties and raucous drunkenness with mates. Often, too, it is a reference to someone's ockerness: the broadness of their Australian accent and facility with crude slang.¹

Who was it who said that eulogy is a place where truth goes to die? Hagiography is always a possibility in a collection like this. The long quotations from the transcript of interviews with Tracker himself are supplemented by many short pieces taken from his friends and colleagues soon after his premature death from cancer in 2015, aged 62. It is evident that the editor, Alexis Wright, struggled with the material in a number of ways: its bulk, its repetitiveness, whether such an approach would project the experience of meeting this flamboyant character, whether it should try to plumb the mercurial depths below Tracker's clowning. Some of the initial signs do not instil confidence in its avoidance of hagiography: the fact that Wright seems to have accepted Tracker's terms about who should contribute to the volume and the constant reiteration from Wright that Tracker was 'a visionary Aboriginal leader'. But ever so gradually, I began to realise that Wright had included material from which a more balanced view could emerge, if sometimes requiring a reading against the grain of Wright's forgiving introduction. It is as if Wright, despairing of the difficulties of the traditional biography in the mode of Bildungsroman, has nevertheless secreted in plain view the material from which a balanced view could be constructed: a sort of invitation to the reader to construct their own biography. I am not sure whether this material is readily apparent to those who did not know Tracker. I encountered Tracker briefly when I worked as a lawyer at the Central Land Council (CLC) and seven years later when I was one of the legal advisors to the National Indigenous Working Group (NIWG) on the Wik amendments to the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth). That relatively modest interaction does not give me any

1 Melissa Bellanta, *Larrikins: A History* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2012).

claim to authoritative knowledge. But it does give me a head start in identifying the material that Wright, to her credit, leaves in the book allowing the image to become clearer of the larrikin struggling with the visionary, and so often winning.

Perhaps unintentionally, the more forthright contributions also open up, rather intimately, the nature of the tensions between Indigenous leaders. This topic is generally hidden by circumspection and the etiquette (mostly honoured in the breach by Tracker) of avoiding direct public criticism of other Indigenous leaders. This is again where Wright held her nerve and resisted saving Tracker from his own hyperbolic (sometimes ludicrously so) criticism of named individuals both black and white. I also take the opportunity to tell a few of my own Tracker stories. There probably should be a website dedicated to collecting this still scattered material.

Story 1: Tracker the occasional grog runner

My first field trip with Tracker was as a young CLC lawyer accompanying him to Yuendumu, where I was to get instructions on establishing a Warlpiri pastoral corporation that could be affiliated with a regional umbrella corporation, one of Tracker's early unfulfilled grand plans (p. 491). In his new Prado, one of the perks of his position as deputy director, we called into Hoppy's Shop on the way out of Alice Springs and Tracker purchased a slab of beer to take to Bill McKell, the garrulous white manager of the existing cattle company. I could not believe it. The law at the time forbade taking liquor into a 'dry' area like Yuendumu and the penalties included the automatic forfeiture of the vehicle. The police compound at Yuendumu was full of such vehicles, many of them also brand new. Was Tracker really willing to risk his new car, fines, his reputation, my reputation as a lawyer and for what? Tracker brushed aside my protests saying that Bill McKell had a liquor permit, a fact that in my legal opinion would not have been a defence for us. Sure enough, as we approached the Yuendumu turnoff, well within the dry area, Tracker stopped the vehicle on a small rise, obviously on the lookout for police (his earlier belief in the legality of his delivery suddenly evaporating). As there were no police in sight, we proceeded directly to Bill McKell's house where Tracker nonchalantly delivered the slab (possibly part of a stratagem to keep McKell content so that he would not interfere with the meeting the following day). The young conscientious lawyer had just failed his first test for larrikinism.

Black larrikinism

Various stories in the book attest to Tracker's unlikely friendships, especially with the hard men and eccentrics of the political right (Bill Heffernan, Bob Katter) and the hard men (or was it just big, gruff men?) among the senior bureaucrats (Bob Beadman). Among these, it is Bob Katter who I think has the greatest insight into the origins of Tracker's personal style by emphasising his period as a stockman, if in Katter's sometimes impenetrable, scatological verbal style (pp. 330–32). In Tracker's willingness to have a blazing row with Katter, replete with obscenities from the stock camp, and his lack of intimidation by politicians at any level, Katter saw in Tracker the head stockman telling the owner of the station what to do. He also saw Tracker's way of telling stories as being equally a thing of the First Australians and of the bush cattle-ringer. I think this direction of interpretation could be taken even further by suggesting that Tracker's fidelity to larrikinism, even when it was counterproductive to high-level political strategy, may stem from his continuing commitment to the era in his life when he was a stockman, with all its egalitarian ethos, its seeking after humorous diversion and its admiration for the well-told yarn.

I was witness to one such incident (of larrikinism winning over political strategy) during the negotiations about the Wik amendments to the Native Title Act in 1997. A very diverse group of Aboriginal leaders from the various land councils, and their legal advisors, had painstakingly hammered out a position paper. One of its first outings was at a hearing of a parliamentary committee into the amendments at which several of the Aboriginal leaders, including Tracker, were chosen to speak to the position paper. To the amazement of all the legal advisors, Tracker in his usual nonchalant way stated a position at variance with the position paper. We all looked at Tracker's CLC lawyer, Chris Athanasiou, who was suitably embarrassed, and one of us whispered through gritted teeth 'this is not what was agreed'. Chris did chase after Tracker following the hearing, but if we were expecting Chris to be his minder and pull Tracker into line that was way beyond Chris's considerable abilities. With complete lack of a sense of irony, Tracker was the first to criticise Geoff Clark, then a commissioner of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), who tried a bit of his own freelancing. Without consulting any other members of the NIWG, Clark dramatically escalated the political rhetoric by calling for a farm-gate boycott (presumably to punish the pastoral leaseholders for not welcoming the coexisting Indigenous rights recognised by the High Court in Wik, although the political strategy was unclear).

The book recounts examples of sage advice to Tracker from his friends and fellow Aboriginal leaders about toning down his joking and clowning so that his ideas would be taken more seriously (most significantly from his long-term friend and ally David Ross [p. 532] and his close collaborator on economic matters Greg Crough

[pp. 457–58]). As far as I can tell Tracker rarely took that advice. The higher the risk and the more inappropriate the circumstance, the greater the payoff for larrikinism. Patrick Sullivan was the first anthropologist to write about a larrikin style of politics among the Aboriginal leaders of the emerging Aboriginal-controlled organisations of the 1970s, in his case community councils, outstation resource centres and the Kimberley Land Council.² Rowse's review summarises it well:

Sullivan's concluding discussion of Aboriginal political style—'larrikin', willing neither to prepare nor to follow through, locally disputatious and given to schism and enmity, and impatient of the formalities with which Europeans disguise the petty, personality-based features of their own political behaviour.³

What is interesting is that Sullivan's description of an Aboriginal political style matches in some respects, particularly the amplification and glorification of personal animosities, what in Wright's book is typically described as Tracker's distinctive personality. Yet, Sullivan tends to see its origins within the broader powerlessness of the Aboriginal position and an initial socialisation of Aboriginal leaders into 'the turbulent subculture' of bitter and personalised competition around what Austin-Broos later described as 'allocative power',⁴ decision-making over limited resources granted by government to Aboriginal councils and service organisations. Tracker managed to bypass this sort of 'training', but he still adopted the larrikin style especially when confronted with more rational (and in Sullivan's terms, more modern) Indigenous leaders (see below).

Relations within the Indigenous political leadership

What comes through clearly in the contributions of David Ross, Owen Cole and Tracker himself is how important these three were to each other. Critically, they liked and respected one another, they all came from humble beginnings, all decided to support each other in seeking further education and in each other's engagement in the new Aboriginal organisations of the self-determination era. They all had a hard-nosed approach to political engagement. This gives a uniquely Aboriginal and historical twist to the phrase 'rising with his circle'. What also comes through is how the steadiness of the other two seems to have continually saved Tracker from the self-destructive tendencies of his own eccentricities and excesses. I wonder what

2 Patrick Sullivan, *All Free Man Now: Culture, Community and Politics in the Kimberley Region, North-Western Australia*, Report Series (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1996).

3 Tim Rowse, Book Review of *All Free Man Now: Culture, Community and Politics in the Kimberley Region, North-Western Australia*. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* no. 2 (1997): 62–63.

4 Diane Austin-Broos, 'Places, Practices, and Things: The Articulation of Arrernte Kinship with Welfare and Work', *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 1 (2003): 125, doi.org/10.1525/ae.2003.30.1.118.

would have become of *Tracker* without the loyalty and forbearance of 'Rossie' and 'Colesy'. From my own experience, I would endorse Wright's acknowledgement in her introduction that *Tracker* could be a divisive figure. I witnessed this among the senior staff of the CLC where David Ross, in comparison, was universally respected. Those who got exasperated with *Tracker* would readily follow Rossie into battle again and again.

Outside of this intimate circle, a large supportive infrastructure enabled *Tracker* to shine and to sometimes quarantine his self-destructive impulses. This infrastructure was the legislative framework of the Northern Territory land councils. The fact that the CLC is a Commonwealth statutory authority with dedicated funding outside the normal budgetary processes underpins a high degree of organisational stability. Moreover, the land council monopoly on processing land claims and dealing with mining and exploration on Aboriginal land (combined with its lack of official responsibility for health, education, local government services and liquor restrictions) meant that it was locked into largely positive processes that, with proper management, would be well received by the traditional owners. Because of its focused official functions, the land council would not be held responsible for the decline in social conditions throughout the 1980s and up to the present. Its legislative framework also insulated its Aboriginal employees to some extent from petty local demands and personality politics. The non-responsiveness of land council employees could always be justified in the relatively acceptable terms that responding to particular local demands was unfortunately outside the functions of the land council and they were prohibited by an outside force (the Land Rights Act) from complying. In a similar way and at a lower level, Aboriginal field officers could say to their relations that land council guidelines prohibited them from transporting liquor in CLC vehicles. In addition there were safeguards within its legislation mandating decision-making by the traditional owners and ratification at a general land council meeting made up of representatives from the whole area; in other words, institutionalising a process for legitimating CLC decisions among its constituency. In saying this I do not wish to minimise the difficulties of recruiting and managing a large staff, the constant political battles of defending the rights granted by the Land Rights Act, and dealing with a very complicated local Aboriginal politics, including contentious mining royalty distributions. What I am suggesting, however, is that the Northern Territory land councils provided a uniquely privileged base from which capable Indigenous leaders could thrive, gain experience and project themselves into the territory and national political arenas—a sort of aristocracy of Indigenous leaders. While *Tracker* obviously brought considerable knowledge, contacts and ideas to the land council, he also benefited from having such a relatively stable base with a large professional staff. This is also true of David Ross and the previous director, Patrick Dodson, and of Marcia Langton, who worked in various roles at the CLC in the 1980s

(including as one of the professional staff anthropologists). But what I want to assert is that Tracker's high-wire larrikin act had two safety nets: his close circle of loyal Aboriginal colleagues and CLC.

What is striking about the material in this book is Tracker's hypercriticism of other Indigenous leaders: particularly Noel Pearson (pp. 265–66, 404, 454), Marcia Langton (p. 266), Patrick Dodson (p. 404), Warren Mundine (pp. 266, 365), Alison Anderson (pp. 446–47), Darryl Pearce (p. 463) and Wayne Bergman (p. 463). Comparing the most criticised (Pearson, Langton, Dodson) to his inner circle, one is immediately aware of a possible hierarchy of educational achievement. There is some evidence in the book of Tracker's sensitivity to his own considerable but more modest educational achievements; for example, where he compares Pearson, Langton and the Dodsons unfavourably with the Aboriginal leader Freddie Pascoe running an Aboriginal pastoral company in north-west Queensland:

They [the likes of Freddie Pascoe] are not going to have the degrees of the Pearsons of the world, or Langtons, or Dodsons, but they are going to be doing it ... To me they [Pearson, Langton, Dodson] are neo-colonialists—they have come to colonise the blacks again. As far as I'm concerned they do not have any answers because they have not been around long enough to study the problems. (p. 352)

More directly he disingenuously claimed not to understand what Pearson and Langton were on about because 'It is all academic' (p. 266); disingenuous because here Tracker underplayed his own educational achievements. In a similar way, only this time more playfully, he (strategically?) cast himself and Murrandoo Yanner as 'field niggers ... out in the fields slaving' as opposed to 'the corn-feds, [who] live in the house with the master' (per Murrandoo Yanner, p. 250). As with many such instances recounted in this book, accurate interpretation is elusive. In its exaggeration of the differences between himself and the (marginally) more educated other Aboriginal leaders, it can be considered as the humorous hyperbole of the larrikin and so as light-hearted and inconsequential. But there is also a serious dagger to the heart wrapped inside it—the accusation of betrayal.

At one level, I understand the ideological split between the likes of Tracker and Pearson but, at a deeper level, the complete lack of recognition by Tracker of the many similarities in their positions and approaches is perplexing. It is easy to imagine, for example, the predictable response of those committed to a rights agenda in the political sphere to Pearson's proposed welfare reforms that involved undercutting some hard-won rights. The sense of the betrayal of the rights agenda would have been exacerbated by a sense of political betrayal of the long-standing Aboriginal alliance with the Australian Labor Party when Pearson deliberately framed his reform agenda in terms that would be attractive to the conservative side of politics, especially in the long conservative reign of John Howard's prime ministership (1996–2007). Politics in the Northern Territory was equally bitter during the long period of Country–

Liberal Party governments (1974–2001), which never failed to play the race card at election time and were committed at every turn to undermining the land councils. I get that.

What is difficult to follow is Tracker's animus when he shared broadly similar analysis and goals to Pearson's agenda (something also noticed by Bob Beadman, p. 570). The contemporary economic dependency, including welfare dependency, is a critical part of both Pearson's and Tracker's analysis. Pearson advocates a return to the 'real economy' and a moving away from the poison of the welfare economy.⁵ In this book we hear of Tracker's commitment to the building up of a 'segregated' Indigenous economy enabling Indigenous people to negotiate with the encapsulating society from a position of strength, and his contempt for the idea of a welfare-based economy as an oxymoron (pp. 343–55). Tracker also acknowledges that after years of welfare dependency many Aboriginal people in remote communities do not have the immediate capacity to take up jobs in their own economic enterprises; they are not job ready (p. 350). Moreover, economic development has always been a part of the Cape York agenda. Where Tracker and Pearson seem to part company is in the need to address immediate crises of law and order, and substance abuse.⁶ This is where the Cape York agenda has always seemed more plausible to me. Surely all the grand plans for economic development, even if they reach their fulfilment, will have limited immediate effect on the social conditions of the remote communities? There is a mismatch between an expected long-term effect of 'segregated' economic development and the immediacy of the decline in social conditions. For reasons outlined below, I also think that both Tracker and Pearson overemphasise the significance of economic motivation for Aboriginal people in remote communities.

Tracker could not find it within himself to admire Pearson's pragmatism and strategic nimbleness in being able to deal with conservative governments, even though Tracker himself kept open lines of communication with selected conservative politicians who he identified as fellow eccentrics. For Tracker it is all about Pearson's empire building and the incendiary accusation of running assimilationist programs on behalf of conservative governments (p. 404). Of course, this is not to say that Pearson does not have a darker side to his public persona and there is no denying Pearson's tightly controlled and well-funded group of organisations.⁷ However, focusing on this tends to ignore other similarities between them, such as their antagonism to the

5 See, for example, Noel Pearson, *Our Right to Take Responsibility* (Cairns, Qld: Noel Pearson and Associates, 2000); Noel Pearson, *Welfare Reform and Economic Development for Indigenous Communities* (Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies, 2005).

6 See Noel Pearson, 'There Is Nothing That Government Can Do for You That You Are Unwilling to Do for Yourself: Sir Robert Menzies Lecture'. Melbourne: Sir Robert Menzies Lecture Trust, 2011.

7 See Jane Cadzow, 'Cape Crusader', *Good Weekend Magazine*, 25 August 2012; Paul Sheehan, 'Dropping Bombs and Stoking Feuds: The Other Side of Noel Pearson', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 August 2014.

Greens because of their potential to inhibit Indigenous economic development on their own land and their attraction to the idea of an Aboriginal organisation being the interface between all arms of government and remote Aboriginal communities.

Tracker is scathing about Pat Dodson and the whole reconciliation strategy: 'That is wonderful for whites, nothing better than hugging a big bloke that has got a big white beard: I have been blessed' (p. 389). Tracker's nemesis Marcia Langton has occasionally also been critical of framing the national debate in terms of reconciliation. While she managed to maintain a relationship of mutual respect with Dodson, Tracker typically needled him. During the discussion of the Wik amendments he was particularly delighted by a Bill Leak cartoon indicating Prime Minister John Howard's contempt for the reconciliation process. It showed Howard and Dodson at a candle-lighting ceremony and, in a second frame, Howard's smug satisfaction when the candle is revealed as a fire cracker which explodes in Dodson's face. Tracker photocopied the cartoon and personally distributed copies to other members of the NIWG during a meeting at which Dodson was present.

There were a few Indigenous leaders exempt from Tracker's scorn: Murrandoo Yanner and Michael Mansell (p. 262), Mick Dodson (pp. 257, 262) and Fred Pascoe, the mayor of Normanton (p. 352). Murrandoo Yanner shared Tracker's deep suspicions of Pearson's opening to the conservative side of politics. This and their natural inclination towards oppositional politics meant that Tracker was uniquely placed to reach out to Yanner during the difficult negotiations over the Century mine and induct him into the world of doing good deals with mining companies, a staple of CLC's ongoing work (if from a better negotiating position than the native title process available to Yanner).

Tracker and Aboriginal women leaders

Wright seems to have had a rather charmed relationship with Tracker, notwithstanding their occasional heated arguments (p. 13). Other Aboriginal women, especially in leadership positions, did not fare so well. Again Wright does not try to tidy up Tracker's image too much, although she seems to accept Tracker's explanation of why he did not implement a Women's Council at the CLC: advice from the chairman, Wenten Rubuntja, to support a women's ritual meeting instead (the Womens' Law and Culture meetings [p. 409]). Wright includes second-hand stories of his misogyny in relation to some Indigenous women leaders: Pat Turner (former CEO of ATSIC), Marcia Langton and Olga Havnen (pp. 267–69). The stories of the intense personality clash between Tracker and Marcia recounted in the book resonate with my memories as well. Their antagonism could probably be predicted from the contrast between the male world of Tracker's larrikinism

and the intellectual intensity, feminism and quickness to vitriol of Marcia's.⁸ What he had against Pat Turner, a distant cousin I believe, I do not know. But I recall Tracker's gratuitous insults directed at her at a meeting of NIWG by suggesting ATSIC, of which she was CEO, was most likely to sell out the Indigenous position in negotiations with the government over the Wik amendments to the Native Title Act.

As the various stories in this book indicate, Tracker's attitude to Indigenous women leaders was more than a case of personality conflicts. I personally observed Tracker explaining to a neophyte minister, Senator Margaret Reynolds, assisting the prime minister on the status of women (1988–90) that, in Aboriginal society, men are the bosses. The minister sat there in the CLC conference room studiously taking notes of the conversation. Of course, with Tracker, one was never quite sure whether he was expressing his considered view or simply taking advantage of a situation that presented itself for further high-level larrikinism and material for later yarning to receptive audiences.

Tracker and the Labor Party

Wright helpfully brings together some of the stories about Tracker's abortive bid to become a Labor politician ('I Am Counted as a Pet Nigger', pp. 275–92). She tries to let the material speak for itself but, of course, it never can. Does anyone who reads this book really think that Tracker being a Labor Party senator would have been good for the Labor Party and good for Tracker? Party discipline would have been torture for Tracker and enforcing it would have been torture for the Labor Party. Tracker would have been a miserable square peg in a round hole. It was a mad plan that Tracker had the good sense to pull out of early. This did not dissuade him from casting himself, very uncharacteristically, as the hapless victim of racial exclusion within the Labor Party. Some notable Labor politicians fell for that story (a 'great tragedy' according to Gerry Hand [p. 280], 'one of my greatest disappointments' according to Martin Ferguson [pp. 281–82]).

The tributes in the book from senior Labor Party figures attest to Tracker's skill at purposefully networking with the powerful, at least in the Labor Party (Laurie Brereton [pp. 308–11]; Nick Bolkus [pp. 316–19]; Daryl Melham [pp. 320–23]); yet another parallel with Pearson. A surprise in the book, then, is his absolute nastiness towards and dismissiveness of Warren Snowdon, the long-standing and hard-working member of the House of Representatives for the Northern Territory. Snowdon's links with the CLC and numerous Indigenous leaders go back a long way.

8 See Peter Robb, 'Who's Afraid of Marcia Langton', *The Monthly*, April 2011.

He has over the years played a critical role in collaborating with Indigenous leaders in raising the profile of Indigenous issues within the Labor Party and with various Labor prime ministers. About this stalwart of the Indigenous struggle, Tracker has this to say:

You are getting people continuously wanting to be blessed, Warren Snowdon wanting to be blessed by the blacks for representing them for 27 years without producing anything. That is a classic, absolute classic. That interview [in the documentary film *Utopia*] summed up Warren Snowdon's political contributions in about five minutes, there was not much to talk about. You can have good intentions but unless you can deliver, forget it, do not even mention it. (p. 389)

I do wonder what Wright thought of passages like this. As already stated, I am grateful that Wright kept her nerve and included them, but I wonder whether she thought this was just another example of Tracker 'fearlessly speaking his own mind'. I also recall being delighted at times by Tracker's unguarded and deflating opinions about well-respected public figures—that is, in conspiratorial, private conversation. There seems to be a transformation of such passages when they appear in print. They gain a solidity and considered character that perhaps suffers from being taken out of context. They present Tracker as ungracious, petty and carelessly vindictive. His typical self-mocking bravado does not come across on the page. Maybe this is also what various contributors really mean when they use exculpatory euphemisms like Tracker being a 'complex character'.

If one had the space, an analysis of the phrase 'not delivering', used by Tracker and by Murrando Yanner, as a harsh critique of Indigenous and non-Indigenous politicians, could also be undertaken. It evokes a politics of delivering the spoils of office but covering vastly different degrees of difficulty. Thus, according to Yanner, Tracker 'delivered' by turning up and providing useful advice. Yet Snowdon failed to 'deliver'—for example, by failing to convince his caucus colleagues to oppose the Intervention.

Tracker the political tactician

Story 2: The Wik amendments and Tracker's jar of vaseline

In 1997 there were tense meetings of the NIWG on native title, a group consisting of the Indigenous leaders of the major land councils and of ATSIC including Pat Dodson, Peter Yu, David Ross, Tracker, Noel Pearson, Mick Dodson, Aden Ridgeway, Geoff Clark, Marcia Langton, Pat Turner, Lois O'Donoghue, Charlie Perkins and Terry O'Shane, among others. All were seasoned political campaigners and had a long history with each other, some of it described in this book. One of the historical tensions dated back to the original negotiations for the Native Title Act in 1993: the politics between the so-called 'A Team' and 'B Team' of Indigenous negotiators. Michael Mansell contributes his version of those events in this book (pp. 239–46), as does Tracker (pp. 246–47). In essence the differences revolved around those who wanted to publicly support the negotiated outcome with the then Prime Minister Paul Keating (the 'A Team': Noel Pearson, Lois O'Donoghue, Marcia Langton, Pat Dodson and David Ross) and those who wanted to continue their advocacy efforts with the Senate to improve the Keating deal (the 'B Team': Aden Ridgeway and Michael Mansell). These differences tended to be expressed in the bitter language of selling out Indigenous interests and having been manipulated by Keating's superior tactics (Mansell, pp. 239–46). With this rather contentious history, the same group were under even more pressure in 1997 because they were facing the conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard, which was unsympathetic to the Wik decision's recognition of coexisting Indigenous rights on pastoral leases.

Into this volatile group strode Tracker with his trademark buffoonery. There were many meetings aimed at hammering out an agreed position, especially before John Howard announced his 10 Point Plan and, in effect, set the parameters of the political debate. At one of these meetings Tracker castigated his fellow Aboriginal leaders for their lack of effective strategy. He placed on the table a small gift box and invited those at the meeting to examine its contents, which, according to Tracker, would reveal the flaws in their current discussion. The box contained a jar of Vaseline, the implication being that the present stance of the working group was only making it easier for the government to sodomise them. Predictably, the reaction from the other leaders present ranged from one of disdain, to offence and bemusement.

The fact that I am recounting this incident after so many years is, I suppose, some testament to Tracker's theatrical flair. But my own reaction at the time, unchanged after reading this book, was that this was an empty and preposterous gesture. Tracker had not put forward any particular alternative strategy, alternative arguments or alternative way of garnering the public support, which was required to pressure the government.* I now see it as a ham-fisted attempt to intimidate other Indigenous leaders into conceding to him the running on issues of strategy. Of course, none of them were willing to do this.

* In his contribution, Chris Athanasiou, a CLC lawyer who worked closely with Tracker, suggested that Tracker did have a strategy:

Early on, Tracker had been prepared to trade off native title processes to secure recognition, economic development and heritage protection. Those were the keys to him, and he tried to move the National Indigenous Working Group to that position. (p. 271)

Tracker's attempt to exploit concerns within the NIWG about being outwitted by government in negotiations raises many issues (beyond the scope of this paper) that continue to inform differing positions among Indigenous politicians about the big political issues of the day. What is it to take a strong position? How are ideas of strength, leadership and courage deployed in the tensions between long-term, difficult-to-achieve goals and shorter term, incremental improvements that may be achievable? In Tracker's case, he attempted to deploy ideas of the superiority of economic analysis as something more telling, more fundamental, and therefore as something stronger than legal analyses.

Tracker and economics

Throughout the book Tracker identifies himself as an economist, although also as having a science degree. One of the drawbacks of unconventional biography is that we never find out exactly what degree or diploma he obtained from Roseworthy College. But his interest in economics and economic approaches to Aboriginal self-determination is clear. He tried to envisage an economically sustainable Indigenous estate that would be an economic power within the broader economy and ensure greater respect in the political arena, both laudable and long-term goals. This is the basis on which Wright and others apply the term 'visionary' to Tracker, although there is plenty of evidence presented in this book of his impatience and boredom with implementation, and his frequent inability to distinguish between his good ideas and his 'hare-brained schemes', as Leslie Alford, a fellow alumnus of

Roseworthy College, described them (p. 469). It seemed to me that Wright was also a little intoxicated by the vision because she repeatedly failed to ask him difficult questions about implementation, or how such a vision related to the contemporary circumstances of Aboriginal people and the non-economic aspects of the imagined prosperous future.

Of course economic expertise does not exist in a vacuum. The broader society is characterised by the privileged nature of economic discourse, despite the many failings of economists and economic theory—one need only think of the global financial crisis and, in our own little corner of the world, the failure of the privatisation of electricity production and distribution. There is a mystique about private enterprise and economics such that business metaphors, like a company being ‘a brand’, are applied to all sorts of social phenomena as if they trump moral and political considerations. The concept of ‘the economy’ is central to our contemporary social imaginary.⁹ Tracker tried to wield the mystique of economics in his contests with other Indigenous leaders more comfortable with the discourse of civil and political rights. Some economists have tried to enlarge the explanatory power of economics by exploring the relationship between economics and psychology, for example, to explain seemingly irrational stock market movements.¹⁰ In Tracker’s hands, however, economic analysis tended towards a doctrinaire economic determinism. On such a view, moral and political discourses are epiphenomenal.

Thus Tracker in 1997 tried to argue with the NIWG that its focus on legislation and the political process around the Wik amendments was misconceived because these processes were all subject to more fundamental economic considerations. I recall having conversations with Tracker’s legal advisors in private about his extreme economic determinism, which they acknowledged, and suggesting that even if politics is determined by economics ‘in the last instance’ (to use Althusser’s slippery phrase), we still had to deal with Prime Minister John Howard’s misconceived belief that he was in charge of the country. Tracker never did win those arguments with the other Indigenous leaders of the NIWG. I surmise it was partly because of his diminished credibility with many of them because of his clowning, but also because he was never able to present a coherent strategy that would work within the very tight timeframes of the political cycle. In addition, the prospects for some grand alliance between Indigenous interests and big business (if that was what he had in

9 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

10 On including ideas of human fallibility and reflexivity, see, for example, George Soros, ‘Fallibility, Reflexivity, and the Human Uncertainty Principle’, *Journal of Economic Methodology* 20, no. 4 (2013): 309–29.

mind) seemed unlikely given the seduction of so many of them to Howard's brand of business certainty through legislating for extinguishment in the case of uncertain leasehold tenures.¹¹

I know it was difficult to have a proper discussion with Tracker about economic matters because he typically took a bombastic rhetorical stance of stating his opinions as irrefutable. But I do wonder whether Wright tried very hard. Questions could have been asked about the role of Indigenous people in Tracker's economic vision. For example, were they to be shareholders, directors or employees? Tracker seems to acknowledge that many of the Indigenous people in the remote communities were not job ready because of generations of welfare (p. 350, and yet another parallel with Pearson). This means that most Aboriginal people in remote communities would not be able to take up the employment opportunities, to be created by economic development, in the short term and it is unclear how this might change in the medium and longer term. So it seems that the immediate (and perhaps longer term) roles envisaged for Indigenous people were as shareholders and directors. This is a very similar model to the way the Northern Territory land councils work—a small group of Indigenous representatives and directors with a large non-Indigenous staff, working on behalf of a larger Indigenous group who remain uninvolved although benefiting in tangible, if diffuse, ways. It is the model of the gatekeeper/advocacy organisation that Tracker tried to sell to his constituency as the benefits of having a cheeky dog guarding the gate (pp. 172, 548). My question is: how do such organisations transform the social conditions of their disengaged constituency? In the language of community development, how does such a strategy create a skilled and more self-reliant constituency?

The land councils can rightly point to ranger programs as a model answer to these sorts of questions.¹² And indeed they are. But what about everyone else in the remote communities? Other experienced anthropologists question whether

11 By 'uncertain leasehold tenures' I mean those leases that were not covered by the Wik decision, which was about pastoral leases only. Other leases may or may not have completely extinguished native title depending on the application of the legal principles enunciated in the Wik decision. The 10 Point Plan and the subsequent legislation pre-empted the judicial consideration of those other kinds of leasehold tenure and legislated that, unlike pastoral leases, they completely extinguished native title rights. The 10 Point Plan and the subsequent legislation preserved the coexisting, although reduced, native title rights on pastoral leases and the Right to Negotiate on pastoral leases where partial native title rights survived.

12 See, for example, Jon Altman and Seán Kerins, eds, *People on Country: Vital Landscapes, Indigenous Futures* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2012). In referencing Jon Altman's work here, I do not mean to suggest that Altman's views aligned with Tracker's; indeed, Tracker takes a broad swipe at Altman's work (p. 451). But Tracker's accusation that Altman's theories are based on the assumption that Aboriginal society would be decimated is a misrepresentation of Altman's work. Contrary to this misrepresentation, Altman emphasises the continuing significance of traditional economic activity, his central idea of the 'hybrid economy'. As always, Tracker's hyperbole and swinging denigration gets in the way of clear exposition. Tracker having avoided the discipline of writing down his ideas does not help. He seemed to be in favour of Aboriginal people engaging in the wider economy and becoming economically strong through that engagement. This seems to be contrary to the main thrust of Altman's ideas of government subventions supporting culturally worthwhile environmental and land management work. But it is not clear.

Indigenous rangers and other similar jobs will only ever apply to a small minority¹³ and whether they are based on a false ideas of a completely separate and unchanging domain of customary environmental knowledge.¹⁴ A common assumption in the public domain seems to be that people in remote communities are happy living their cultural lives—the happy traditional owner, somehow separable from generational problems of transmission of cultural knowledge, epidemics of ill health, substance abuse, law and order problems, and domestic violence. These are the intractable ‘wicked problems’ that Indigenous non-government organisations and governments are continually grappling with and that seem impervious to a political strategy based on ‘delivering’ more rights and more funding. I know that Tracker was well aware of these problems. I recall him on TV, apparently trying to shock his Aboriginal constituency out of complacency, by bluntly stating that their future was the dialysis hostels of Alice Springs. My point is that the links between Tracker’s economic vision and the ‘wicked problems’ were never convincingly set out.

I also detect in Tracker’s fascination with big economic opportunities and economics more generally a masculinist bias, as if the big questions of Indigenous economic development and political strategy were for men, and other questions of health, education and substance abuse were for others (women?) to worry about. The fact that his economist friends were men provides a clue, if not conclusive evidence.¹⁵ While Tracker was disparaging of most of the white advisor types as ‘white trash’ or ‘do-gooders’, his preferred white economist friends seem to have had a privileged relationship with him. Indeed, Toly Sawenko is one of the few non-economist white advisors who seemed to be able to negotiate the very narrow path towards friendship and mutual respect with Tracker (pp. 479, 486, 547–8).

It is a pity that Tracker was so antagonistic to anthropology (notwithstanding his provocative view at the time that he appreciated Strehlow’s recording of Arrernte culture).¹⁶ In Peterson’s early analysis of land rights,¹⁷ he would have found

13 Nicolas Peterson ‘What Is the Policy Significance of the Hybrid Economy?’ In *Engaging Indigenous Economy: Debating Diverse Approaches*, ed. W. Sanders (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 55–64, doi.org/10.22459/CAEPR35.04.2016.05.

14 K. de Rijke, R. Martin and D. Trigger, ‘Cultural Domains and the Theory of Customary Environmentalism in Indigenous Australia’, In *Engaging Indigenous Economy: Debating Diverse Approaches*, ed. W. Sanders (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 43–53, doi.org/10.22459/CAEPR35.04.2016.04.

15 Cf. Marcia Langton, ‘The End of “Big Men” Politics’, *Griffith Review* 22 (2008): 11–38.

16 For Tracker’s anti-anthropologist rant see pp. 367 and 451. Tracker’s contrarian views about Strehlow I recall as a personal communication from Tracker on a work trip to Yuendumu; ‘provocative’ and ‘contrarian’ because most Aboriginal leaders of the time were antagonistic to Strehlow who had amassed a collection of sacred objects and sold photographs of secret-sacred ceremonies to be published overseas (see Barry Hill’s *Broken Song: T. G. H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession* (Sydney: Knopf, 2002)). Indeed, CLC was at the time involved in a bitter and ultimately unsuccessful struggle with the Northern Territory Government about its plans to purchase sacred objects and research materials from Strehlow’s widow and to set up the Strehlow Research Centre to administer them (John Morton, ‘Romancing the Stones: The Past and Future of the Strehlow Collection’, *Arena Magazine* 4 (1993): 39–40; Robyn Smith, “‘Stuff at the Core of Land Rights Claims’: The Strehlow Collection”, *Journal of Northern Territory History* 20, no. 4 (2009): 75–93).

17 Nicolas Peterson, ‘Capitalism, Culture and Land Rights: Aborigines and the State in the Northern Territory’, *Social Analysis* 18 (1985): 85–101

confirmation about the relative precariousness of governmental commitment to land rights and its economic basis. He may also have appreciated the concept of the 'Aboriginal domestic moral economy'¹⁸ and theorising of the imperviousness of kin networks to economic incentives for frugality and capital accumulation (see p. 443 for Tracker's version: 'their money is everyone else's money'). He would have hated Sutton's arguments about traditional cultural traits exacerbating contemporary social problems¹⁹ as being too much like Noel Pearson's. I wonder whether he would have seen anything of himself in Sullivan's description of 'Aboriginal political style' from a previous era.

The depth psychology of Tracker

It is Tracker's close friend Owen Cole who alerts us to the elusiveness of Tracker's psychological make up, suggesting that a team of eminent psychiatrists after spending a week with Tracker would either end up mad or rewriting their textbooks (via Sean Bowden, p. 284). I do not propose to go down the track of the psychoanalysis of Tracker, although there is much material in this book to ponder: Tracker's constant need of an appreciative audience; his unswerving commitment to larrikinism; his restlessness and continual travel; his lack of follow-through and his disinterest in committing his ideas to writing; his boastful competitiveness with other Aboriginal leaders; his ludicrously hypercritical judgement of them; and his need to paint himself as the master tactician who would avoid being a sell-out, unlike them. Nathan Miller, his collaborator on horticultural projects, noted his lack of patience with implementing his ideas and the need for others to take them before anything eventuated (p. 487). One contributor, Greg Crough, his close collaborator on economic matters, ventured a little way down the path of depth psychology. Beyond the bluster and iconoclastic public stance of Tracker, he wondered whether a certain reserve, which he sometimes detected in Tracker, was evidence of an underlying lack of confidence (p. 545).

For me one of the most poignant stories in the book, and one revealing possible deep hurt, are those concerning Tracker's reaction to the Stolen Generation. Typically, Tracker made outrageous jokes about his own membership of the Stolen Generation, that his relations tried to give him away (recounted by Geoff Clark, p. 564). Michael O'Connor, Tracker's unionist friend, was in touch with him on the day of The Apology and surmised that it was a very rough day for Tracker (p. 535). Tracker also told Martin Ferguson directly that he could not attend The Apology because there were too many memories (p. 336). Murrandoo Yanner tells the story

18 Nicolas Peterson and John Taylor, 'The Modernising of the Indigenous Domestic Moral Economy', *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 4, no. 1–2 (2003): 105–22.

19 Peter Sutton, *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the End of the Liberal Consensus* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2009).

of Tracker attending one of the first Stolen Generation conferences in Darwin (pp. 324–25). He became irritated with the roomful of people crying and pouring out their pain and after about half an hour of this he got up and exploded, 'no one bloody took youse away, your parents gave you away and look at you, I wouldn't blame them' and walked out, much to Yanner's embarrassment. Yanner interpreted this incident as a reflection of Tracker's strength in not showing how the experience affected him. But it seems to me, together with the accounts of his reaction to the day of The Apology, that this incident does reflect a deep hurt. Tracker's brother William was apparently more forthright. He stated that, after returning from Snake Bay, he could not fully reconnect with his family in Alice Springs because he could not speak the language (as told by Nathan Miller, p. 488).

Conclusion

I fear this extended review may seem a bit sour. That has not been my experience of reading the book. For me it was like a virtual reunion with some of my old colleagues and acquaintances, although I am not sure how readers who did not know Tracker will struggle through the 600 pages of this book. For them it might be like the out-of-control eulogies at contemporary Aboriginal funerals in Central Australia, which sometimes go on for hours, reducing some of the mourners to a despair that they will ever reach the end.

I am not so hardhearted as to be completely inoculated against Tracker's rough charm. There is still a part of me that misses the mad bastard. I appreciate Wright's diligence in finding out about Tracker's early life and for making contact with his house parent from his Croker Island days, Lois Bartram, who, as well as providing stability and care for him throughout his early life, contributed the wonderful photographs of the very young Tracker. I have discovered too late that Tracker had a sentimental attachment to Alan Paton's novel of the early years of black struggle against apartheid in South Africa, *Cry, The Beloved Country*. Lois Bartram apparently read it to them as children. I, like many matriculation students of my era, read it at high school. Maybe a discussion of that book would have been a way down the narrow road.

I am, though, none the wiser about the official justification for the removal of Tracker and his siblings from their parents. One suspects this lacuna, like the absence of any account of his family life with his wife and daughters, is out of respect for the sensitivities of his wider family and their right to privacy and private grief.

Story 3: Tracker's wedding story

On another long trip to Yuendumu, Tracker had a bigger audience of lawyers in the Toyota and naturally fell into the role of storyteller/entertainer. He recalled his time as a young stockman in Alice Springs chasing various pretty young Aboriginal women, his rising ardour only to be prematurely extinguished by his more genealogically knowledgeable relations revealing 'that's your sister [cousin]'. After several incidents like this, Tracker said he resolved to marry a white woman. That turned out to be Kathy. Her family came from a very conservative outback town in Queensland, Cloncurry, where the wedding was held. Tracker took as his best man a cousin who was considerably darker than him. As they approached the church, filled with all of Kathy's white relations and friends looking around apprehensively to catch their first glimpse of Tracker, his cousin was first to appear at the door of the church to the audible gasps of the congregation, followed by sighs of relief when Tracker finally appeared around the corner and it became clear who was the groom. Tracker said that any apprehensiveness his in-laws may have had soon melted when the grandchildren started to appear.

My main critique of the book is the unresolved tension between the introduction and the body of the book. Wright's larrikin-style hyperbole about Tracker as the visionary leader is not sustained throughout. There we confront slabs of Tracker's incoherent, grandiose verbal sludge, which very infrequently contains a gem. Like others I have discussed the book with, I wonder why Wright decided to put so much time and energy into recording Tracker's story when there are so many other deserving Aboriginal leaders whose stories could be told. Obviously, they are not as interesting as Tracker's story. Or is it just an Indigenous version of the cult of celebrity, which prefers a commitment to being an outrageous character above all else? Finally, although encouraged by Wright to do so, I wonder if I have taken the book too seriously. This is perhaps the final revenge of Tracker who in so many ways demanded to be taken seriously, but who could just as easily flip into larrikin mode and assert that he was just yarning.

This text is taken from *Australian Journal of Biography and History*:
No. 2, 2019, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.