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TRACKER TILMOUTH

Alexis Wright

Tracker



Tracker: Stories of Tracker Tilmouth
by Alexis Wright

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Reviewed by [Michael Winkler](#) •

In Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria* (2006), Girlie claims, 'If you ever want to find out about anything in your vicinity, you have to talk to the mad people.' There are a lot of mad people in Wright's biography of Aboriginal activist, thinker, and provocateur 'Tracker' Tilmouth. He is probably the maddest of all, in the Kerouacian sense of 'mad to live, mad to talk', but, according to his mate Doug Turner, his 'madness gave him sanity'.

Wright takes a polyphonic approach to profiling her quixotic subject. The lead voice belongs to Tilmouth, but she augments and counterpoints his words through interviews with more than fifty informants, in often pungent vernacular. The voices overlap, re-embroider, and articulate different perspectives.

When he was about four, authorities removed Tilmouth and his two younger brothers from their Alice Springs home and dumped them at a mission on Croker Island off Australia's north coast. In his mid-teens he returned south, working at Angas Downs, where he found it was 'very difficult to work out who you were and what you were ... *I am a blackfella but not that black.*'

Through formidable intelligence and a fierce work ethic, Tilmouth gained a tertiary education and became a key figure in the Central Land Council. He cultivated relationships with politicians and bureaucrats, and muscled into the fray on a wide range of issues. Two interviewees liken him to Paul Keating. Former colleague Owen Cole says, 'You needed people like Tracker, otherwise you were just going to settle for the status quo.'

In 1998 Tilmouth was a leading candidate for a Senate position, but was nobbled by forces within the Northern Territory branch of the ALP. His response was to snarl, 'Labor likes pet niggers, and I'm counted as a pet nigger. I'm allowed to mow the lawns, but I'm not allowed up on the veranda.'

Tilmouth's salty tongue and virile intellect lashed anything he considered gammon. The Garma Festival was 'The nigger's (sic) picnic'. The native title debate was 'an absolute sell-out by Aboriginal people'. Pat Dodson was 'a mobile wailing wall'. Recognition and Reconciliation represented 'be kind to coons week'. At other times he could be devastatingly smart when demolishing shibboleths, such as the inanity of pushing private home ownership in remote communities.

He had deep enmity towards Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton, and Warren Mundine – beneficiaries of significant corporate and political patronage, and preferred voices for non-Indigenous conservatives. 'They eat the right biscuits at the right time and use the right fork for the cheese. Their discourse can be in language that white people find amazing, that Aboriginal people use the English language better than they can.'

Tilmouth's wit was legendary, and there are copious examples in the book. (On Julia Gillard: 'Probably the last time she saw a real Aborigine was when she was licking a postage stamp.') However, many allies caution that he sometimes used humour inappropriately. Sean Bowden speaks of 'the subtlety and depth, the distinction' of the man, but wearied of 'this constant banter. Sometimes it was infuriating because he would let it contaminate a serious moment, and sometimes he used it too often.'

Phillip Toyne says his jokes 'were often amazingly offensive'. Turner says he used disparaging names, such as mud monkeys or rock apes, to demarcate Aboriginal people from different areas. Murrandoo Yanner tells of attending the presentation of the *Bringing Them Home* report in Darwin, when Tilmouth yelled 'No one bloody took youse away, your parents gave you away and look at you, I wouldn't blame them.' Yanner was mortified but thought it was Tilmouth's idiosyncratic way of dealing with his own pain as a stolen child.

Tilmouth's great passion was for economic development. This is captured in a long section, 'The Vision Splendid', where he expatiates on potential Central Australian land use, agricultural and horticultural ideas, industry and infrastructure dreams. It is the guts of his life work, important to document, but the general reader may long for a 4WD to get through the denser scrub.

Wright says that, 'His life was lived with the aim of achieving something greater, to sculpt land, country and people into a brilliant future on a grand scale.' Tilmouth also understood, and tried to teach his acolytes, that there can be no political agency unless it is underpinned by an economic framework. Although he was an entrepreneurial ideas machine, almost all of his thinking seemed to surround mining and food production. He gave scant regard to economic development through tourism, transport, renewable energy, art, or cultural knowledge.

Tilmouth said sagely that, 'A welfare-based economy cannot work, it does not work. It is an oxymoron.' However, his job creation schemes ignored the contemporary reality that, in Nicolas Rothwell's words, 'The able-bodied and healthy among the remote community population choose not to work because they have no need to.'

Tilmouth had the qualities of a natural politician – energy, intelligence, courage, chutzpah, charisma. He was also, like many great politicians, full of human flaws. There is plenty of ammunition in *Tracker* for those wishing to discredit his ideas, due to defects in the man. Multiple informants talk about his sexist language and poor behaviour at times towards women. He brags about when he 'massacred five hundred dogs and pups' on a covert poisoning spree in Amata.

Some of his thinking also seems contradictory. He expresses enthusiasm for a pan-Aboriginal movement and exasperation with traditional owners who do not want mining or agriculture on their land. At other times he derides the widespread ignorance about the profound differences (and schisms) between language groups and communities, and calls native title 'a clash of cultures between the urban Aboriginal ... and the traditional Aboriginal people'. He voices concerns about enforced assimilation of people who are 'trying hard to find a long-lost language and culture to give themselves an identity',

but despairs at the lack of Western-world business savvy in remote communities.

The pop-psychology conclusion is that this multifariousness was within Tilmouth the man. He was a desert Aboriginal fella with green eyes. He could catch fish in the Gulf in the morning and monster mining companies in the afternoon, tell bush yarns all night and be sitting on Bronwyn Bishop's knee in Canberra next day. Wright says, 'He was among the most extraordinary contemporary story-makers in the Aboriginal world. He was the story.' Her bricolage presents a fractured portrait of a mercurial man she calls an enigma. It is unclear that he really knew himself.

He was a trickster figure in many ways, conjuring mischief and alchemical outcomes through the power of his voice and personality. He was also superbly unbowed. Cole said, 'He was audacious, and when you have been pushed back and downtrodden for so long you feel a little bit intimidated, but he was always out there and in your face, and *here I am.*'

Wright's brace of ineffable, awkward, uncanny novels (*Carpentaria*, *The Swan Book* [2013]) will be unravelled and enjoyed by readers when other contemporary fiction is forgotten. *Tracker*, a book performed by a folk ensemble rather than a solo virtuoso, adds to her enduring non-fiction oeuvre that captures the unique ground-level realpolitik of Aboriginal Australia.