



The 2018 Stella Prize Shortlist

Extract

Alexis Wright

Tracker

THE MILES FRANKLIN
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR'S
TRIBUTE TO THE VISIONARY
ABORIGINAL LEADER
TRACKER TILMOUTH

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Tracker



From Alexis Wright's Introduction

Tracker should have had a personal secretary taking down all of his ideas and patenting them, but he gave them away freely in conversations, with the action plans for projects that were on an enormous scale, or small community projects to create income from commercial activities. All of these ideas depended on the understanding of people from government, professional workers and developers; and mostly, his thinking was more advanced than theirs, and they would not have the willingness, or ability, or resources, to put plans they had not thought of themselves into action, with the paperwork they required.

Some of these ideas can be seen in the opportunities he created for thousands of Aboriginal people. But the full legacy of his work and thinking lives with the people who heard his stories, experienced his wit, or worked with him. He always left the details for others, those who listened to him, and in the work they did with him. You could say that his visionary ideas will be missed by Aboriginal people, but much of his work still lives in the minds of some of the best thinkers in the country. Tracker's legacy is in this archive, his filing cabinet, the minds of other people. The road maps or blueprints of the vision splendid, *el grande plano*, are spread among people of all walks of life around the country – the politicians and political thinkers, economists, resource and land developers, media representatives, Aboriginal communities and their leaders, and the everyday people who were Tracker's mates. Some of this rich tapestry of knowledge has been drawn from the vaults of these other peoples' minds, and told in this book.

I have always thought that all stories are important, but stories only come to life and stay alive when they are being imagined and

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remembered, and then in the telling, how they are retold to make sure they are being heard. The problem with creating this book was the question of how you would write a story about someone who challenged all expectations? Tracker used to say, *I want you to write something for me, Wrighty*. But how could you do the imagining on behalf of someone who was impossible to keep up with, who could never be contained, who never wanted to sit still long enough to go through the details time and again, as a writer would need to do to get the story right. Instead, he expected you to know exactly what was going on in his head, and to drop whatever you were doing, and get his stuff done at once! He was never going to sit around long enough to let other people define him, or to allow himself to be compartmentalised in somebody else's smaller orbit of thoughts.

Wrighty, I just want to bookend this. Let others tell the story. Let them say what they want.

This was how Tracker envisioned this book, which he wanted to call *The Unreliable Witness*. He was simply saying what our mob say time and again, *Let people have a say. Let them tell their own stories. Let people speak for themselves*. This is a reasonable response to a lifetime of confronting the legacy of our stories being told and misrepresented by others, as has been happening since the arrival of the First Fleet. Tracker made stories happen in reality. For him, stories were for changing reality at whatever level it took to make something happen. These were not stories that could make people live happily ever after, they were stories to make peoples' lives better by making a difference, and along the way, to create amazing memories.

The stories in Tracker are told from many points of view, including Tracker's own, when he was well enough to do so

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and found space in the last years of his busy working life. The book helps to explain some of his ideas and his significance as a leader of his times. There are many voices in these pages. The contributors were all chosen by Tracker. He wanted them to tell their parts in the story. They include his two younger brothers William and Patrick. Patrick sadly passed away in 2016 from cancer. The book also includes many of Tracker's oldest friends and closest colleagues.

Sometimes it is the little stories that people tell that are the most potent, and when fragments of remembered stories are placed together, they combine to create a truer and fuller portrait than a single story on its own. Yet this is not what we generally teach one another, or practise in our story-making and our literary endeavours. We like to create our own versions of the story. The author or the biographer interprets and selects, decides what will be told to the best of his or her ability, and writes on behalf of the subject. But the biography can only offer a fraction, the fractional stories, snapshots, flavour or sense of the whole, and relies more on what is unsaid sometimes, than said. *Tracker* attempts to follow an Aboriginal tradition of storytelling practice for crossing landscapes and boundaries, giving many voices a part in the story. This blessing of stories and voices was very much Tracker Tilmouth's way of creating stories for others to expand and make use of in creating *the vision splendid*.

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