



Charles Darwin University

Sophie Cunningham, Warning

The Story of Cyclone Tracy

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Sophie Cunningham, *Warning: The Story of Cyclone Tracy*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2014, ISBN 9781922079367, viii + 306pp, paperback, \$32.99.

My initial reaction to this book was to ask: do we need another book about Cyclone Tracy? A library catalogue search under the term 'Cyclone Tracy' revealed a list of hundreds of items. In many cases, Cyclone Tracy turned out to be merely one of several subjects dealt with in an autobiography or books with titles like 'Great Australian Disasters'. Around one hundred items include Cyclone Tracy or Tracy in the title, but many are videos, official reports, commemorative newspaper brochures, or booklets of personal reminiscences containing fifty pages or less. One item from the latter category is Ella Stack's *'Is there anyone alive in there?' Our Cyclone Tracy, Darwin, Christmas 1974*, published in 2013; probably the most recent publication on the matter apart from the book that is the subject of this review. Major books that focus on Cyclone Tracy are actually quite few. These include: Alan Stretton, *The Furious Days: The relief of Darwin* (1976); Keith Cole, *Winds of Fury: The full true story of the great Darwin disaster* (1977); Bill Bunbury, *Cyclone Tracy: Picking up the pieces* (1994; twentieth anniversary); and Gary McKay, *Tracy: The storm that wiped out Darwin on Christmas Day 1974* (2004; thirtieth anniversary). All the sources mentioned are referenced at least once in this new book by Sophie Cunningham (2014; fortieth anniversary).

So what is different about Cunningham's offering? One is her motivation for writing the book. Stack and Cole, for instance, lived through the cyclone and played some role in the city's rebuilding. Stretton was at the centre of events immediately following the cyclone as head of the Natural Disasters Organisation, and McKay had been an Australian army officer when he participated in the massive Darwin clean-up operations in January 1975. Only Bunbury had no personal link to Cyclone Tracy, but his book was one of a number written as a result of his job in ABC Radio's Social History Unit. Cunningham, in the meantime, is a Melbourne-based writer whose main connection to the story is a childhood memory of unrolling the *Age* newspaper that had been delivered to her family home and staring with incomprehension at a photograph of piles of rubble that had once been a city. As an eleven-year-old, Cunningham was shocked at the idea that a city could simply disappear on Christmas Day and deprive all those kids of their toys.

In Stretton's book the author appears as the central figure throughout, but the other publications mentioned all rely to a greater or lesser

degree on interviews with other people who had experienced Tracy's fury and the great devastation it had wrought. Cunningham also conducted interviews in the course of her research and gives special acknowledgement to one of her interviewees, Bill Wilson, who at the time of Tracy was a policeman in the Northern Territory Police Force, but will likely be better known to many reading this review for his later career as an historian at Charles Darwin University. Otherwise, Cunningham's book makes far greater use of the many oral histories held by the Northern Territory Archives Service than any author before her. Using those oral histories, and other sources, Cunningham gives great detail on subjects that others treated only in passing, if at all, including the extent to which members of Darwin's Greek population were made scapegoats in post-Tracy Darwin, with Greek builders accused of shoddy practices resulting in houses blowing away, while others were unfairly accused of looting. Cunningham also makes good use of police records to reveal a picture of life on-board the *Patris*, a government-hired ship that provided emergency accommodation for hundreds of people at a time, until it sailed out of Darwin Harbour in November 1975. Cole reported that one woman said her life on the *Patris* was 'the best time' she ever had, but that to others the *Patris* became known as 'the hell ship of Darwin'. The numerous cases of assault, drunkenness and attempted suicide recorded by Cunningham suggest that the latter was the more likely scenario.

In her footnotes, Cunningham renders sources in full at first mention and by author subsequently. In the bibliography, however, she uses the rather singular system of listing items by title, making it extremely difficult to match the two. Otherwise, Cunningham's book is attractive and generally well-written with minimum typographical errors. Despite my initial scepticism, it is a welcome addition to the existing material, but one must now wonder if there is much more to be written about the matter. Nevertheless, the all-important fiftieth anniversary in 2024 will likely deliver at least one more volume.

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