

# Occasional Paper No. 57

## EIGHTEENTH ERIC JOHNSTON LECTURE 2004

### “Cyclone Tracy – AN ILL WIND”

by Bill Bunbury

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First of all may I say how honoured I feel in being asked to give the Eric Johnston lecture. Looking at the list of predecessors I feel I have several hard acts to follow.

I was also fortunate enough to meet Eric Johnston in 1987 when I first came to Darwin and later to interview him for the radio series I was to make on Cyclone Tracy. By then he was Administrator of the Northern Territory and memories of Cyclone Tracy were 13 years old.

I was here in 1987 to present a Radio National talk-back program on the value of preserving records of the past - it was one of several we had set up throughout Australia that year. The aim was to help establish a national historic records search - people all over the country were being encouraged to preserve and share important letters, diaries and other historical memorabilia.

But what made the Darwin talk-back totally distinctive was the way people recalled what was arguably Australia's worst natural disaster, Cyclone Tracy 13 years earlier. Callers phoned in with great feeling of the loss of not just valuable historical documents but highly personal letters, family photos, sporting trophies and the like, all blown away in one catastrophic storm on Christmas Eve.

Driving into the new Darwin it was hard to picture the devastation of 1974. Gleaming new buildings and pleasant parkland had softened the impact, removed it altogether from visual memory.

But never - it seemed - from personal memory. The talk-back program inspired me to make a four part radio feature series and later write a book based on those collective memories, following the lives of families and individuals affected by the events of Christmas Eve 1974.

Later I was to find myself comparing my impressions with those of the late Barbara James, journalist and historian, who flew back into Darwin in 1975, a few months after Cyclone Tracy. She described the final approach:

Instead of seeing the lush, tropical town that had seduced me here in the first place in 1967, I saw just little brown sticks of what looked like twigs, which was all that was left of the trees. And there were no birds, no insects, only mosquitoes - they seemed to have survived everything - and cockroaches - but everything else was just as I imagine an atomic bomb would have been like and in a strange way it made me identify with people who'd been through a war.

In 1987 almost every one I spoke to had a story about Tracy and almost everyone had been touched by it. The memories included the death of loved ones, the loss of home and the will to go on, the separation of partners and conversely the strengthening of others.

In one way I came to see Cyclone Tracy as a metaphor for dispersal and renewal. A cyclone enters from one direction and leaves in another. What it blows away it also changes. And I'll try to explore and illustrate some of those changes in this talk from both the book and the original radio documentary series.

## CYCLONE TRACY – AN ILL WIND?

One of the themes I also wanted to explore was ANTICIPATION.

How much were people aware of what was coming their way on December 24 1974. In an earlier documentary on an unexpected earthquake in Western Australia I'd recorded the characteristically observant comments of rural people about what they'd noticed before the quake struck. They'd commented on strange events in nature, birds stopping in mid-song, dogs howling and restless, the colour of the sky and so on. So I wanted to see whether the same was true for Tracy.

Here's how the 1991 radio series starts.

### CUT 1 ANTICIPATION

Begins Music on the day...

**Ends** ... even the trees were still.

### DUR 1'50

On the day it was just dark, gloomy and sweltering hot. The first couple of frogs started to croak and as the day wore on there was a frenzy of sound which was almost deafening.

There were strange things happening; a feverish activity of ants who were madly cleaning out their nests, and with the first rain beetles were falling from the sky, thousands of beetles. Things were rushing against the fly-wire in a mad frenzy of insect life. And it made one uneasy.

That particular morning I woke up early and I was high up in the hills somewhere, on a bluff where I could see for miles and miles. And in the early morning, just as the light came, there was a column of mist that came off every piece of water in the whole district.

But even very small waterholes were marked by this column of condensation, rising vertically, straight up into the air. I'd never seen anything like it before in my life.

Everything just went dead. There was no bird life, no movement. Even the trees were still.

In a lighter vein it's perhaps worth recounting the delightful, if possibly apocryphal, story of the earnest young journalist (*not me I hasten to add*) who, impressed by aboriginal foresight in getting out of town safely on Christmas Eve, asked them how they knew Tracy was coming.

The reply?

"Oh we watched the ABC TV weather forecast."

But some people, in a very practical way, had foreseen the danger to Darwin, not specifically from Tracy but from cyclones in general.

Peter Dermoudy was a Hobart architect who'd come to the Territory in 1960. As the cyclone season approached in late 1974 he'd gone on local television to warn residents about what he felt were potentially dangerous building features, lots of unprotected plate glass and a general complacency about the risk of damage or injury.

He himself was to spend Christmas Eve sheltered inside the East Point Gun Emplacement probably the strongest building he could have chosen but his view through its gun slits, lit up briefly by flashes of lightning was of boats capsizing and sinking in Darwin's outer harbour.

The Royal Australian Navy lost a patrol boat, the arrow that night, and two of its crew were drowned. Two other patrol boats were damaged and a third was driven ashore. Twenty trawlers, ferries and private yachts sank, many of them engulfed by the huge waves that Tracy generated.

Any complacency on the part of the locals on Christmas Eve 1974 was partly due to the sense that luck might be on their side.

But Darwin has a long history of cyclonic destruction. In 1897 - an unnamed cyclone - they weren't named in those days - destroyed Darwin's jetties, blew ships into the mangroves, lifted houses up and threw them away and killed 28 people.

In 1937 George Haritos, then a boy of 16, recalled his uncle trying to nail a corrugated iron roof down as a cyclone bore in. The wind was so strong that his hammer kept missing the nail he was trying to hit. He also saw one in 1948 that came close to Darwin, devastating the Bathurst Island mission and laying trees down like match-sticks over Cape Hotham.

Much nearer our own times, in 1971, Cyclone Kitty also came close but faltered over Melville Island, less than fifty kilometres from Darwin itself. In 1973 Cyclone Madge had appeared over Groote Eylandt to the east of the city.

And shortly before Tracy itself, on 3 December 1974, Cyclone Selma came within sixty kilometres of Darwin but turned away at the last moment. So perhaps a lot of people on that Christmas Eve thought or hoped that Tracy would be a good sport and do the same.

As Dr Ella Stack commented:

We're in a cyclonic area and ever since I've lived here, almost every year, we've had warnings of cyclones in the vicinity. Some of them have resulted in high winds that broke the plate glass in the front of your house and were replaced by your insurance, so maybe we were a bit blasé.

It seemed that many Darwin residents didn't really believe the warnings on television and radio. And even when the weather bureau reported that Tracy was over Shoal Bay, many thought that was still a long way away.

Moreover it was the Christmas season with all its attendant preoccupations, last minute shopping, parties to go to, dinners to prepare and presents to wrap. Few had time to give Tracy much thought.

But as the day wore on some people became more apprehensive.

## **CUT 2 TRACY COMING IN**

Begins Siren Cyclone Warning...

Ends ... we could die FX wind.

## **DUR 4'33**

What was also interesting was what people - those who had the chance that is - took with them when they left their homes.

## **CUT 3 WHAT PEOPLE TOOK**

Begins So then I got that awful...

Ends ... puppy food all night.

## **DUR 2'00**

But the overwhelming sense was one of helplessness in the face of natural odds - odds that reduced even normally skeptical people to resort to the hope of divine intervention.

## **CUT 4 FRAGILITY**

Begins We got to the back door...

Ends ... could do nothing.

FX WIND

### **DUR 2'33**

The twenty-fifth December 1974 dawned sodden, cold and grey in Darwin. The worst storm in the city's history was over but its legacy had barely begun. Cyclone Tracy had taken at least forty-nine lives on land and many more were still missing at sea. The city had disappeared in a mass of rubble, wrecked homes and uprooted trees. The survivors were to spend the next few weeks, months and sometimes years, picking up the pieces, not just of their homes and possessions but their lives and hopes.

Here's how Christmas Day began for many Darwin residents.

### **CUT 5 SURVIVAL**

Begins It was quite strange...

Ends ... quite the same since then.

### **DUR 1'40**

In the south of the country, from Sydney across to Perth, people only gradually realised on Christmas morning what had happened to Darwin the night before. That wasn't surprising. Tracy had knocked out all links to the rest of the country. Bill Fletcher, then a journalist with ABC television, found that:

There were no communications. No telephones or telexes worked - eventually we got a call - via the state ship Nyanda in Darwin harbour and the radio officer got a call through to ABC Perth and we told them what had happened. This was at seven in the morning.

Even if communications had stayed intact, there were few with the time and certainly not the electrical power to sit and watch television news in Darwin. Those with battery radio sets were better off but the ABC's radio transmitter was damaged and only back in action on 27<sup>th</sup> December.

Darwin's commercial radio station, 8DR, had also been badly damaged but its technical radio staff worked alongside the ABC to restore communications to Darwin people. This was a vital post-Tracy task.

It was important to tell people where to get food, shelter, fresh water, and later, as the mass evacuation got under way, broadcast lists of people who were to leave Darwin. This large scale exodus would now be the task of the Commonwealth government.

Only a few months before Tracy, in February 1974, the Commonwealth Government had set up the Natural Disasters Organisation in Canberra.

Now it would face its first major test. At its head, Major General Alan Stretton who quickly assumed responsibility for the wreckage that had once been Darwin.

His first priority was to depopulate the city; get as many people out as possible. In his view it was urgent to restore power and clean water to the city as soon as possible to prevent an outbreak of disease.

The sewerage authorities were already digging emergency latrines at the high schools where many refugees had taken temporary shelter. And rotting food from broken and powerless fridges could be smelt in every suburb.

In addition the city now presented many extra hazards. People had already been killed during the cyclone by flying debris and now shards of broken glass lay everywhere. Cut feet were almost the most common injury. There were also mouths to feed and only limited resources to support them.

Stretton made a quick decision. Women, children, the sick and injured and what were described as non-essential personnel were to be sent south to relatives, friends or volunteers who would offer them a home for the time being. It was a decision not without its critics who argued later that families that stayed together, cleaned up together and rebuilt their lives had more chance of staying together. Others again agreed that, given the gravity of the situation, Stretton had little choice but to empty the city.

Without power there was no pumped water and each day in this situation enhanced the risk of what he feared most - endemic disease and further loss of life. A huge air-lift was arranged involving the domestic airlines and the RAAF.

But to get an idea of what mass evacuation meant to a typical family, let's hear Beth Harvey's story.

Beth is a trained nurse and her husband, Peter, was then working at the Bureau of Meteorology. In fact he'd rung Beth as Tracy approached on December 24 and suggested she cook the Christmas dinner early as the power might be off on Christmas Day.

When things started to look serious that night, they took every precaution, taking shelter at the height of the storm in the most central room, the kitchen - with Beth singing nursery rhymes to calm their children.

In the morning they were still alive and thankful to have survived. But with small children and no running water or power, they agreed reluctantly that Beth and the children would have to accept evacuation, while Peter would stay and continue to work in Darwin.

We can now join Beth Harvey as she waited with her children in the Darwin airport for a plane south.

#### **CUT 6 SEPARATIONS – AIRLIFT**

**Begins** Well, we just stood...

**Ends** ... panicked the whole time.

#### **DUR 1'30**

Well, we just stood. We registered then with the people behind the counter. I don't know who they were, but we registered and said who we were and where we were going, and luggage labels were written out with our names and destinations attached to the children like they were pieces of baggage.

There were no tickets issued or anything like that. The toilets were absolutely dreadful because there was no water so there were buckets of water, but there was no light in the airport, no air conditioning, it was steamy. There were crowds, there was nowhere to sit.

People were standing with their suitcases and then as a plane would go the next lot of people would go out onto the tarmac from inside the building and then the next lot of buses would be unloaded.

As we went out the door they were still checking where people were going and as we got to the door. That was the first time I ever panicked in the whole situation because Paul and Wendy - Ben wasn't walking, I was carrying him; I was carrying a suitcase and I had an overnight bag as well and carrying Ben too. Paul and Wendy were in front of me and two women pushed between me and the two children. I totally panicked and a man said, 'It's all right keep your shirt on, it will be all right.' I said, 'They're not your children! That's the first time I panicked the whole time.'

Beth Harvey and her children arrived in Sydney, were met by a total stranger who offered them her home until they could return to her own parents in Adelaide. Her husband Peter eventually joined her and, like many others, they returned to Darwin but left in 1977, making their next home in Adelaide.

Incidentally the Darwin airlift set one record which I don't think has yet been surpassed. Captain Laurie Clarke, who flew an empty 747 into Darwin on 27 December and out again the same day with 643 passengers, often filling in between the seats and using every spare cabin space available. That particular 747 in 1974 was licensed for only three hundred and seventy-two, but as he said:

The hold was empty. We put as many personal items on board as we could but that still didn't overload the aircraft. We were still only half-loaded when we flew out of Darwin.

One evacuee had no regrets what ever about leaving her home and her city - several organisations, like the Salvation Army and the Red Cross, manned reception centres in southern cities around Australia to help mothers wives and children as they came off the aircraft bringing them out of Darwin.

At Perth Airport, June Dunstan, from the Red Cross, was in charge of a team handling incoming Darwin passengers. Her staff were taking their names, intended addresses in Perth, details of next of kin, etc. to let relatives back in Darwin know that, yes, they had arrived safely and were staying with cousins, in-laws, friends and so on and here were the details.

All was going well with the processing until one of June's staff asked her if she could deal with one passenger who refused to give her own name, let alone the name of anyone with whom she was going to stay.

June took the woman aside, offered her a cup of tea, explained why they needed the information and gently asked her why she wouldn't give her own details. The woman looked around, as if to make sure they were alone, lowered her voice and said confidentially:

I've been trying to get away from the old wretch for years and this is my best chance yet.

But back in Darwin in January 1975 nearly ten thousand homes were in need of urgent attention. Alan Stretton organised a salvage campaign almost at once, mobilizing the Armed Services to carry out the clean-up.

Dawn Lawrie still remembers the naval presence in particular with gratitude, the long hours they worked and the way in which they handled tasks that many locals - still in shock - were unable to handle. To quote her:

I remember saying to one of them, 'You know we'll never forget this,' and he said, 'We're your navy.'

Royal Australian Navy Captain Eric Johnston, later to become Administrator of the Northern Territory, and in whose honour these lectures are held, was in charge of Naval Operations Darwin. His own headquarters had been almost totally destroyed. Communications with the rest of Australia had been cut and two naval staff and five dependants had been killed during Tracy.

Although he had only just over 300 men and women under his immediate command, he immediately dispatched them around the city. Some went to help run the switchboards at police headquarters and fire stations handling the emergency.

Others worked as dispatch riders, using motorbikes to get through blocked streets. But with the arrival of naval reinforcements from the south the big clean up could begin.

There were particular advantages in using the navy. It was a self-contained force carrying its own food, water and power and quite independent of the wrecked hinterland. Sailors could

come ashore each day and clear up a block, cover valuables with tarpaulins and go back to their ship each night, without being a burden on the hugely strained city.

Dr Ella Stack, a general Practitioner and later mayor of Darwin, believed that only an outside force could have helped in the way that the navy did.

As she put it:

It was very hard for us to clean up the debris around our houses. It was hard mentally and emotionally to do it, not physically, and so it was absolutely marvelous when the navy came in and did it for us.

One young naval officer came up and with great pride presented my husband with his World War Two medals that he'd found in the rubble .

The Australian Army and the Royal Australian Airforce also played distinct roles. Many RAAF staff gave up their leave to help ferry evacuees out of Darwin in the first few days after Tracy, while the Army worked in with the airforce and helped with the distribution of food, blankets and tarpaulins for roofless homes.

Keeping civic order was also part of potential post-Tracy chaos and the question of looting raised itself very early on. The various state police forces who sent some of their officers to Darwin to help maintain order were obviously mindful that looting could and did take place.

Jack Haritos, who owned a retail business in the city, acknowledged that while there was looting, it was not always understood by inter-state police who didn't know the community and sometimes misjudged the situation. In his own family two of his nephews were told by a local shop-keeper that they could come and take anything they wanted because their groceries were going bad anyway. The police believed they were stealing them.

In other cases, and once power was restored, washing machines or fridges in working order, were often commandeered from abandoned houses to help provide bedding and food for the temporary homeless.

Tracy was also a salutary reminder of how power-dependent Western society had become even in 1974. In 2004 when computers run even more of our lives, the consequences, if another Tracy came, would now be even more marked.

June Prickett worked for a wholesale food company and was one of the few women left after Tracy in a largely male post-Tracy workforce. Her job was looking after the accounts for the emergency food supplies then coming into Darwin by ship. The food had to go out to various distribution centres but:

It all had to be hand invoiced and added by hand because we didn't have any electricity and there was no way to use any adding machines.

The mains power stayed off for three months and people had to run generators or cook with gas or firewood. Storing food was a major problem. The Haritos family went to the local high school every night for their major meal of the day until things got back to normal.

Work in itself was often an anodyne for people coping with personal loss. As journalist Bill Fletcher expressed it, the first week after Tracy seemed to go incredibly quickly.

You worked, helping your work mates and their families and you slept, and there was very little time for anything else and one day became the next and the next. You had work to do and you did it and no one thought about the consequences. I think without it you'd never have survived - you'd have just gone mad. You would have thought too much about what had happened and what you'd lost.

People coped in different ways with the disaster. Some found it hard to go back to work and try to resume the threads of normal life.

William Walsh, better known as 'Strider, as he later called himself, was working as part of a Civil Defence restoration team in the aftermath of Tracy. He observed surprising variations in both behaviour and reaction to what had happened.

#### **CUT 7 COPING - HIPPIES /TEAK**

Begins The other general conclusion...

Ends ... a political effect.

#### **DUR 2'25**

Beyond Darwin itself - wherever people had been evacuated, there were also signs of strain and shock. Some were to experience temporary memory loss and young mother Beth Harvey still had concerns for her children, however safe from cyclones in far away Victoria.

#### **CUT 8 RENEWAL AT A COST**

Begins When we went to Melbourne...

Ends ... shock of the thing.

#### **DUR 2'40**

Just leaving Darwin was stressful enough. Husbands and wives were separated, often for long periods, which in itself put a strain on marriages. But equally difficult for some was the process of return.

The authorities had introduced a permit system to stem the flow of people returning to the city. They argued that it was important to render Darwin habitable before it could support large numbers again, a situation that many Darwin residents found extremely frustrating.

Chris and Diane Dart had been away from Darwin when Cyclone Tracy struck. They were on leave from Chris's job. But they knew from their insurance company that their home had been badly damaged and understandably were keen to get back to see how badly and whether the contents were secure. Newly married, they had left wedding presents behind, some still unwrapped and were desperate to save or salvage what they could. But their efforts to return immediately were blocked. It was ten months before they were allowed to return.

The authorities justified their refusal on the grounds that supplies - which had to come in by ship and plane - would be insufficient to feed and shelter large numbers. They had allowed skilled tradesmen and essential personnel to remain and brought others from elsewhere if they could be of use, but, otherwise, set strict limits on the city's population.

Police had set up road blocks south of Darwin to prevent unauthorised return, obstacles which some cunning drivers sometimes skillfully by-passed, getting out of their vehicles and hitch-hiking back into the city with the help of friendly natives.

Dawn Lawrie, later member for the seat of Nightcliff, and who probably considered herself politicised by Cyclone Tracy, felt very strongly about these bureaucratic barriers.

#### **CUT 9 RETURN DAWN LAWRIE**

Begins The authorities introduced...

Ends ... wanted her to come back.

#### **DUR 00'56**

Darwin citizens wishing to return to their home to rebuild their lives and make their future, rebuild their homes, were told unless they had a permit they couldn't come back. Now these

permits were issued by petty bureaucrats who would ask questions as to where were you going to live.

At this stage I was involved in that system. I was handing out addresses of houses which were habitable so people could say:

'Oh well, I'm staying at 26 Smith Street,' or whatever until they woke up to the fact that all of a sudden there were hundreds of people giving the one address, but we were deliberately finding ways a round the system. It was dreadful to say to people, you can't come back. Even worse if a woman who'd been evacuated and was applying to come back to Darwin and her husband was here, they would ask her husband if he wanted her to come back.

The consequences of separation varied. Jack Haritos and his wife Helen, were able to rebuild their lives without leaving Darwin. And they noticed that the social disruption caused by the cyclone affected people in many different ways.

### **CUT 10 STANDING THE STRAIN**

Begins Oh yes some business...

Ends ... never be recalled.

### **DUR 2'05**

Oh yes some businesses couldn't face it. They just gave up.

Husbands were separated from wives. Husbands came back to see what they could do. A lot of them took to drink. My son was in a gang that went a round a few days after the cyclone cleaning up rotten food out of refrigerators of people that left Darwin but he said there were cases where people were sitting round drinking beer and the food was still rotting in their refrigerators. He said he struck quite a few of those homes, people weren't helping themselves.

Most people did, these were probably isolated cases, but wives went south, husbands stayed up here. Families did break up, yes. A lot of them just couldn't face the prospect of having to rebuild and it did break up a lot of marriages.

I knew many who were evacuated and because of their age, because of the financial situation, a lot of them never did come back and to me they were the story-tellers of the early days in Darwin. I think we'll miss them. We've probably lost a lot of little tit-bits about Darwin that will never be recalled.

Another major social change was the temporary loss of children. So many had gone south that for a while the city was generationally speaking, two dimensional, and at times one dimensional with the loss of many older people from the first major evacuation. For a while Darwin was a city without children and very few grandparents.

Dawn Lawrie had also sent her children south but as soon as possible she brought them back.

### **CUT 11 TOWN SANS CHILDREN**

Begins Other people had not been...

Ends ... children back.

### **DUR 00'24**

Other people had not been so fortunate, their children were still south. Now when I brought them back I'd walk down the street and they'd come over and pat my kids on the head. They were hungry for children. I now realise what a dreadful thing the Pied Piper did to Hamelin when he took the children because a society ceases to exist.

Similarly with pets. In the days just after Tracy there was a panic reaction and people were shooting dogs. Now I hid my dog, the puppy had gone south with the children, and people were coming up and patting the dog and touching the dog. I think they needed that because that's part of our society.

I think I was a catalyst for people insisting they would bring their children back.

Gradually children returned and many families got their homes and lives back together. But Darwin's future as a city and as a capital was for a while in the balance. There was the suggestion - seriously considered - that the site was too cyclone-prone to justify rebuilding. But Darwin had endured previous cyclones and experienced war damage and the people of Darwin wanted their city where it was.

Nature alone hinted at recovery, Jack Haritos, looking at his stripped garden in early 1975 noticed:

Small leafless plants now throwing out flowers. Green began to come back. It was uncanny, as if nature was determined to survive.

June Prickett felt she had already lent nature a hand. The contents of her fridge, complete with turkey stuffing and sauce all set for Christmas Day, but by then distinctly off, went into a hole in the garden and planted a paw-paw above it. Months later it bore luscious fruit.

But when any city, let alone the capital of a region, is destroyed, there is a sense of civic decapitation. How certain was Darwin's future and would the city ever look the same again. Restoration is not just a matter of street re-design or planting street trees and repairing wrecked homes; it is also a question of ownership and control.

For those who wanted to stay and rebuild their lives in Darwin it was important to recreate the city in a way that connected them to the life they had known before disaster struck their city. And they wanted to be the ones who did it. But the challenge was considerable.

Dawn Lawrie who became Territory member for Nightcliff in 1975 felt very strongly about the way people from outside the city were re-planning Darwin. It would have a huge effect on the topography of her own electorate.

## **CUT 12 RE-PLANNING A CITY**

Begins Canberra planners flew in...

Ends ... that first dry season.

### **DUR 00'34**

Barbara James had noted, even before Tracy, that while there had been a lot of debate about planning and building codes and so forth the debate quickened considerably after the disaster.

The planners, in her view, and she gave full credit to the integrity of their intentions - saw a clean slate, a flattened town where they could rebuild from scratch and which in their view would be a better future city.

However they reckoned without the wishes of those who'd stayed on - people who wanted a strong say in any changes that were being considered. Canberra planners with a vision of a new Canberra in the tropics inadvertently spawned a host of resident action groups.

But Barbara James also felt that unwittingly, the damage that Tracy did also awakened Top End Territorians to their built heritage.

## **CUT 13 JAMES - HERITAGE**

Begins What happened with some...

Ends ... by people who live here.

#### **DUR 00'41**

What happened with some people I think was a desire to at least retain the few things that were left and learn more about the history of the place.

There were strong moves to save the old Town Hall built in 1883 and the old Courthouse in 1884 and there was such a strong resident action group feeling that most of these buildings were in fact restored and I think that sparked off a great interest in what Darwin was and people wanted to know more about it.

I think its been in a funny sort of way for a resurgence of interest in the territory by the people who live here.

So what can we say about Cyclone Tracy 30 years on – An Ill Wind? or was it perhaps more than simply a malevolent storm?

At one level Tracy was invaluable in terms of what we were able to learn about cyclones and how to build in the future to avoid the massive destruction that befell Darwin in 1974. Cyclone Althea which hit Townsville in 1973 had taught some lessons but, effectively. They were only implemented after Darwin's own disaster the following year.

Building codes were rigorously revised after Tracy. In the eyes of some too rigorously at first. It looked as if Darwinites might be condemned to live in homes that resembled bomb-proof bunkers - with high energy use and cut off from the tropical climate many had sought to come to in the first place. Gradually however designers reached a compromise between strength and enjoyable living.

But the only test would be another cyclone of the magnitude of Tracy - an event which Darwinians hope will never happen in their lifetime.

A common expression among old-timers to categorise other Darwinians still has currency in the territory. BT and AT - *Before Tracy and After Tracy*.

Eric Johnston, who'd seen Darwin through the aftermath of Tracy, both in his naval role and later as Administrator, sensed a certain stoicism about the survivors of Christmas Eve 1974.

#### **CUT 14 TOUGH PEOPLE**

Begins In some ways...

Ends ... more threatened since.

#### **DUR 00'50**

The experience had been life-changing and life destroying. Homes and possessions had been blown away. So had marriages and hopes and aspirations. But many of the people I talked with felt that in other ways they had grown stronger, forged deeper relationships and valued friendship and help well above material possessions. Beth Harvey summed this up very well:

You felt closer to people because you'd shared an experience very few people probably have shared. You felt very united for quite a while.

And she added

#### **CUT 15 BETH POSSESSIONS**

Begins I think I know now...

Ends ... until the cyclone.

### **DUR 00'47**

I think I know now what's most important to me as a person. I hadn't had to think about that before but, when I think about it now, I think the decision of what we took when we went south, the photos and things like that, I think the sense of belonging to other people, you know this is what photos do, that's what your life was, they're usually photos of people and people are far more important than places or monuments or anything like that. I think these things were probably always important but I didn't realise their importance until the cyclone.

But physical memories of Tracy still remain vivid. William Walsh or 'Strider, perhaps sums up the feeling of many who went through Cyclone Tracy in December 1974. Eleven years later, in 1985, he witnessed the approach of Cyclone Gretel and old memories returned.

### **CUT 16 TRACY LONG SHADOW**

Begins With that Cyclone Gretel...

Ends ... when I heard that wind.

### **DUR 00'42**

With that Cyclone Gretel (April 1985) it was interesting. At one stage the wind went round to the south, which indicated to me that the cyclone was to my east.

The wind went round for a while and it also started to roar. It started to sound a bit like a distant jet engine and I'd forgotten about that noise, that roaring noise, and as soon as it started to roar, it all came back to me with appalling clarity and I really didn't like it at all, it scared me really badly. I had a really bad fright when I heard that wind.

I concluded both the radio series and the book with thoughtful comments from survivors Jack Haritos and Howard Truran, both long-term Darwin residents. And I added the thoughts of Indigenous broadcaster and community leader, Echo Cole, who in acknowledgement of those who did not make it after Christmas Eve 1974, speaks, I think, for all who lost family and friends in that unforgettable night.

### **CUT17 COLE/TRURAN HARITOS**

Begins Even now every time...

Ends ... experiences aren't they?

### **DUR 00'53**