‘Refugees from Wild Time’

David Trigger

Chloe Hooper
THE TALL MAN
Hamish Hamilton, $32.95 pb, 276 pp, 9780241015377

Jeff Waters
GONE FOR A SONG:
A DEATH IN CUSTODY ON PALM ISLAND
ABC Books, $24.95 pb, 246 pp, 9780733322167

C H L O E H O O P E R has written an insightful and intensely personal book about the death of an Aboriginal man in police custody on Palm Island off Townsville in north Queensland. In late 2004, Cameron Doomadgee, aged thirty-six, died after being arrested by Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley. The Tall Man follows the initial internal police investigations, the riot on Palm Island which was prompted by an announcement that the death was accidental, several stages of the inquest and the drawn-out process whereby Hurley was eventually charged with manslaughter and acquitted by a Townsville jury.

The race politics that arose were complex in their historical origins and in what the case says about the experience of many Aboriginal people with the Australian judicial process. Hooper’s achievement is to portray the issues without the superficial point scoring so prevalent in writings about indigenous affairs. While she has great empathy for the Aboriginal families involved, this is no simplistic or one-dimensional account. Hooper thinks deeply about the circumstances of both the deceased Aboriginal man and the policeman, and about their families and backgrounds. Unlike those who might proclaim unswerving and exclusive allegiance either to the Aboriginal cause or the moral uprightness of police, Chloe Hooper explains that she tries ‘to look at things from every angle’.

Hooper, in her investigations, formed close associations with some of Cameron Doomadgee’s family on Palm Island. She also visited Doomadgee, in north-west Queensland, the location of his mother’s and his stepfather’s traditional country. As a result, the reader feels the emotions of an author trying to understand how Australia’s colonial history has produced the dysfunction – and the transformed yet distinctive cultural differences – that permeate contemporary Aboriginal towns. Her access to the police subculture that protectively enveloped the accused officer was clearly more limited. Hooper was not able to speak to Senior Sergeant Hurley, and her interactions with his supporters were decidedly constrained in comparison with her dealings with the Aboriginal women.

Hooper examines the contested details as to whether Hurley (tall and heavily built) was guilty of causing the death of the smaller, and drunk, Aboriginal man. Initially, Doomadgee was arrested for allegedly swearing as he passed by another arrest being carried out by Senior Sergeant Hurley and an Aboriginal police liaison officer. The real success of the book lies in what the case reveals about those who were associated with, or supportive of, both the dead man and the accused; and in what is revealed about the wider societal processes and forces that influence and structure the protagonists’ actions and beliefs. The police officer emerges as a tough man who chose for some years the work of law enforcement across a number of indigenous communities in northern Queensland. He was not someone who avoided close contact with Aboriginal people; he did voluntary work with children and had an interest in reconciliation.

Cameron Doomadgee, though the same age as the police officer, lived life ‘in a different country’ where ‘to reach puberty is for many to reach the edge of the abyss’, where a child can be hit ‘while being used as a shield by her mother against her father’ and where the ‘compassion fatigue’ of outsiders is matched only by the ‘tragedy tolerance’ of the Aboriginal community. Hospital records list various illness and injuries during Doomadgee’s short life. These include alcohol-related seizures, renal trauma, stab wounds and broken ribs. In early 2005 his sisters faced the prospect of attending the inquest while coping variously with epilepsy, diabetes, a tumour and deafness (‘probably due to untreated childhood ear infections’). His unconscious cell-mate, after giving inquest evidence and learning for the first time that he was present when Doomadgee died, was later saved by his grandmother from setting himself alight. Eighteen months after his own death, Doomadgee’s seventeen-year-old son committed suicide by hanging himself.

Hooper describes the residents of Palm Island as ‘refugees from Wild Time’, the colonial frontier period so named by the Doomadgee family’s relatives in the Gulf Country. It is now the police (mostly, though not exclusively, white) who face the dispiriting task of keeping the peace among a population harbouring at least as much dislike as respect. The difficulty of the job should not be underestimated.

Hooper tells us that the ‘war’ between police and indigenous people in places like Palm Island is really a ‘false battleground’. She writes, ‘the spotlight on Hurley and Doomadgee locked in a death struggle ignored the great horror taking place offstage’. The case demonstrated the enormous chasm between everyday life in white and black Australia. Most of the lawyers ‘could barely comprehend the Palm Islanders’ language’. This gulf is even apparent in well-intentioned attempts at cross-cultural sensitivity. Frustratingly for Doomadgee’s Gulf Country relatives, ‘Mulrunji’ became the name for him that lawyers and the media used repeatedly. It had been inaccurately transcribed as the traditional term for a recently deceased person: ‘moordinyi’. Doomadgee’s elder sister knew of the term, but neither
Aboriginal locals nor white outsiders knew how to spell it in written English; ironically then, a non-existent word, in lieu of the name of the person who had passed away, came to circulate across well-meaning white Australia. Even if the term had been transcribed correctly, Hooper points out that ‘the family and witnesses continued to call the dead man Cameron’. The Gulf Country custom is no longer practised in what she calls, perhaps with too much literary licence, the ‘deracinated’ community of Palm Island.

Hooper’s literary flair helps to reveal the informal signifiers of two worlds: for example, evoking the often decrepit and ill-fitting clothes worn by Aboriginal witnesses in court: ‘[h]unched slightly in her faded clothes, rolls of fat on her back, [she] stood for everything white Australians don’t want to know about black Australia.’ In the public gallery, Doomadgee’s partner ‘looked broken and exhausted in an old faded shirt over a cotton dress and, despite the rain, thongs’. The policeman’s girlfriend, by contrast, was ‘pert, neat, tailored, made-up, bejewelled’.

Not all interpretations are convincing, one jarring example being the description of ‘surreal’ voting at a police rally, with arms held ‘out at a 45-degree angle’ rather than straight up, presumably intending to suggest Nazi-like sentiment. However, the book’s recounting of the author’s personal experiences mostly works well and presents a rich narrative that will both inform and dismay.

While Hooper is open about her difficulties in learning about northern Australia (both black and white), Jeff Waters begins Gone for a Song: A Death in Custody on Palm Island by suggesting that Palm Island ‘would be recognized by anyone who’s traveled through the poorer outer suburbs of any Australian city’. Like Hooper he writes with passion, but his story is much less subtle. Waters presents an argumentative political analysis of Aboriginal affairs in Queensland, announcing at the outset his hope that the reader will come to share his anger.

The book’s strength is its simple message — Hurley’s denial that he caused the death was improbable, and racist forces in the police and government sought to excuse his guilt. Doomadgee died from horrendous internal injuries caused by a severe compressive force to his abdomen. At first Hurley denied having fallen on top of him as they struggled in a doorway en route to a cell; later, Hurley said he must have fallen on the prisoner, as this was the only explanation for the injury revealed by the autopsy. He denied having deliberately knee-dropped, elbowed or punched Doomadgee while he lay on the ground. Throughout the ensuing legal saga, there were different opinions as to proper process that should have been followed and, indeed, as to the evidence incriminating the policeman.

Waters appears as interested in telling the reader what is right and wrong in Aboriginal affairs as he is in the actual death. He provides details about the conflict-ridden history of Palm Island, drawing on available documents and expertise. His chapters are sprinkled with lengthy quotes from relevant reports and inquiries. He draws on the television and radio current affairs programmes in which he interviewed various individuals in his role as an ABC journalist.

Gone for a Song is an overt piece of political advocacy, at times well argued but replete with suggestions and details that seem emotive. Does it add anything to describe Queensland police headquarters as a ‘dark and ominous building, which contrasts with the rest of Brisbane’s skyline’? The shrill comments about ‘secret evidence’, doubtless meant to be dramatic, may simply perplex readers rather than enhancing their understanding of the issues. Blame, it seems clear, should be apportioned generally to white Australia and specifically to government. Waters runs the risk of only engaging with converts to the Aboriginal cause. This contrast with Hooper’s thoughtful and reflective approach in The Tall Man makes for two very different accounts focused on the same tragic case.