

Extraordinary survival memories

HISTORY

SURVIVAL LEGACIES: Stories from Aboriginal Settlements of Southeastern Australia. By Peter Kabaila. Kabaila. 576pp. \$69.95.

Reviewer: MICHAEL MCKERNAN

The hardest issue I faced in working on the history of rural Australia (two books so far) was how to tell the story across the many generations of the lives of the first Australians. I failed almost completely in the first book and was anxious about my attempt in the second book. Having read this remarkable book, I now see what can be done. But potential historians of indigenous Australia be warned: success and enlightenment comes only after a savage amount of very hard, time-consuming work across many, many years. Hats off to Peter Kabaila, then, for the extraordinary achievement *Survival Legacies* represents.

You will have noticed that this book is self-published and that is a pity. The book deserves the best possible distribution and wide exposure in the bookshops. It would seem, too, that Kabaila has not only funded the publication of this book but the many years of research that the book needed. I have not been able to find out much about the author but it seems he has no institutional support or connection. But he has not worked alone. His book depends on the generosity and engagement of hundreds of people whose story he tells. And what a story. It is positive, affirming, sad in many parts, never despairing, courageous almost everywhere, and deeply moving.

Kabaila tells the story of people in Wiradjuri country, an extensive area of central and southern NSW. Normally I'm dubious, perhaps scornful, of tattoos but the cover of this book challenges that prejudice, showing a tattoo in its grandeur and strength. A proud contemporary Wiradjuri man looks fiercely and with strong determination at the camera. The name of his people, Wiradjuri, is tattooed on the whole of his forearm from elbow to wrist. He appears, also, to be holding a photograph of his forebears. They are dressed well for the period but are standing in front of a rudimentary bark hut, so some worldly success there, and the appearance of poverty, too, in their lives. But they have survived well



Determination: Wiradjuri man Andrew Charles.
Photo: cover image, *Survival Memories*.

enough to allow this young man his freedom and confidence and to know his place in the world. Rarely does a cover so splendidly explain the book that it encloses. This book, remember, is self-published. The cover is simply masterly. It demands, I think, that you open this book.

And the cover matches the book's contents. This is a compellingly personal book. It will tell you the exact location of a particular hut in a particular settlement. It will tell you how the house was arranged, where the various members of the family slept, what they ate and how they cooked it, how they went about their daily lives, how they made their way in the world. It will tell you about children's games and schooling, about travelling in Wiradjuri country, about relationships, about good times and bad. The overwhelming theme is the courageous embrace of change made by the Wiradjuri people, about their adaptation to new circumstances, and about their determination to survive. This is as positive a book about indigenous Australia as I have ever read.

Much of it is in the words of the men and women themselves. Much of it, too, I suppose, carries the dangers

inherent in oral history. Can it all be true? Probably not; these are memories and reminiscences; stories passed down along the generations. Yet I have confidence in the storytelling for two reasons. First, the stories are remarkably consistent and it would need a giant conspiracy to have organised that. Second, Kabaila has spent what seems like a lifetime on this task and knows enough to intervene, to support, or gently correct the stories as he records them. An old man who knew the Wiradjuri language told me this, an informant says. Kabaila intervenes in the text: this can have been only one of four men, whom he names. These were the only men then speaking Wiradjuri. That depth of Kabaila's knowledge convinces me.

The book opens with a welcome from a Wiradjuri man, Vincent Bulger, who sets the tone for all that will follow: "My grandfather was a full-blooded Aborigine with initiation scars across his chest, born when New South Wales was a colony of Queen Victoria." Bulger tells of his mother, taken from her family as a girl, of his six brothers and sisters, of grinding poverty after the death of his father, of collecting dead wool as a little kid to earn a few bob. He tells, too, of the Brungle Mission, of marriage and family, and of working for the railways over 32 years. "The best boss I ever had," one of his white workers remembers. "We have achieved so much," he writes, "and seen so many changes." "Read this book," Vincent Bulger concludes, "find out more about life, family survival and change in Aboriginal Australia." Amen to all of that.

I can only hint here at the complexity and completeness of this book. Divided into regions and places it invites you to dip into it. What happened around Yass, you might ask, or along the Murrumbidgee. There will be multiple voices available to tell you. You might be inclined to think that there is too much detail but this is as much a documentary record as it is a narrative. We cannot tell the story of indigenous Australia, too many historians in the past have claimed, because we do not have the records. Well, they were there in the memories of the people, in the memories of the survivors. It was just that we were too stupid or to blinkered to ask. Thank you Peter Kabaila.

• Michael McKernan lives in Canberra and is a historian.

• *Survival Legacies* is on sale at Co-op Bookshops and Smiths Alternative Bookshop.

Casualties of ordinary life

MEMOIR

GHOSTS BY DAYLIGHT: A Memoir of War and Love. By Janine di Giovanni. Bloomsbury. 288pp. \$29.99.

Reviewer: JANE SHILLING

As a reporter from various war zones – Sarajevo, Chechnya, Rwanda – Janine di Giovanni cut a striking figure. She was beautiful, evidently brave, and rather mysterious. One wanted to know more about her. Who was she? What made her pursue such a dangerous occupation? What did she do when she wasn't putting herself in harm's way? Her journalism was as memorable for its passion as its elegance, but the story was never about her. Until now.

Ghosts by Daylight is di Giovanni's account of the other things that happened: before, during and after the war-reporting. War remains a presence in her book. After two decades of close contact with anarchy, death and cruelty, it became her constant companion. "In his sorrow he found one source of relief in war," reads her epigraph, from Tacitus's *Agricola*.

The story begins as di Giovanni and her husband, Bruno, arrive in Paris where they are moving into a flat filled with boxes containing "remnants of the life that both of us were trying to leave behind". Di Giovanni's



boxes contained "painful Gucci stiletto heels . . . some bits of metal shrapnel . . . a packet of love letters and two flak jackets with Kevlar inserts". Bruno's, she writes, "were more exotic".

There was clearly not a hope of leaving their former lives behind, not least because it was in a former life that they first met. In the summer of 1993, Bruno, a cameraman for a French television channel, and di Giovanni, a reporter for a British

newspaper, arrived in Sarajevo. They fell in love, but they didn't get together. Instead they ran into each other, across continents, for almost 10 years. Even when they did become a couple, there was "much of what the French call *malentendu*". But eventually Bruno, on assignment in Rwanda, rang di Giovanni, on assignment in Somalia, and said, "Let's get married." That was when the trouble began.

Bruno and di Giovanni were both accustomed to a life lived on the high-octane fuel of pure emotion that war compels. Neither was well adapted to the patterns of ordinary life: "I was not afraid when I was in the middle of chaos. It was real life with its vast responsibilities and insecurities that frightened me," she writes. Among their

new responsibilities was a child. Di Giovanni found motherhood a source of acute anxiety. Bruno, by contrast, took naturally to fatherhood, managing the nappy changes and di Giovanni's neuroses (she took to hoarding food, medicines and cash as though for an imminent siege) with patient tenderness.

"This real life, with all its sharp edges, was terribly difficult," di Giovanni writes. In the end, it proved too difficult. A trauma psychiatrist said she had survived experiences that had driven others to madness and suicide because she was resilient. Bruno was admitted to hospital with a back problem and although he returned home, nothing was the same: "The ghosts of the past were chasing us. And they had managed to catch him."

Di Giovanni writes with sadness, love and generosity about endings: about losing friends, colleagues, her father, her brother and her marriage. She is that unfashionable thing, a high romantic. Fortunately, she possesses a technique formidable enough to carry it off without recalling *The Wilder Shores of Love*.

The analyst and writer Adam Phillips wrote that psychoanalysis makes suffering bearable by making it interesting, but that is what storytelling was doing long before Freud. And that is what di Giovanni has done here: turned the harsh facts of a life full of extremity and chaos into a story of defiant elegance: the Gucci heels next to the shards of shrapnel.

Telegraph, London