

REVIEW

C A CRANSTON *looks back at the extraordinary life of Deny King*

'A MASS OF THAWING CLAY'

When bushwalker Ben Maloney, emaciated and frostbitten, walked out of Tasmania's southwest wilderness last April, the world was presented with a Thoreauvian caricature of humanity as a 'mass of thawing clay.' Maloney had survived thirty-seven days in the wilderness, just three days short of a miracle. Deny King, on the other hand, lived there for fifty years. His experiences are recorded in a plump and warm biography, complete with photos and index. Historically, the biographical form has its origin in the early accounts of monarchs, heroes, and saints. By Christobel Mattingley's account Charles Denison King (1909-1991) fits all three categories. A confirmed royalist, described as 'one of the great characters of the Australian bush,' King blazed tracks with his father and sister, prospected, went 'snigging' with his bullocky team and his cat, then enlisted as an Engineering Artificer in the Army. After World War Two he returned to mine tin, paint landscapes and reign for fifty years at Melaleuca in Tasmania's southwest wilderness. An autodidact, he gained the letters MOA for services that included advising universities, museums and the CSIRO on the flora and fauna endemic to the Port Davey district.

Deny's life is the stuff of local legend. Example: the family piano which escaped the 1934 bushfires because Deny backed up the bullocks, dug a pit, and buried it. His is a story about strength and ingenuity, and includes the classic battle with the bush. The bushman's gentler aspect is provided by the piano as an 'embedded' text. The piano resurfaced years later to find refuge in Deny's army-style hut, in Melaleuca. Then there's the one about him walking from the southwest to Hobart in thirty hours for the love of Margaret Cadell, a woman he eventually seduced through his letters, his drawings, and his talking-up of the southwest. Read about Deny's care and concern for his bioregion, his commitment to the endangered orange-bellied parrot for which he constructed Huon pine safe havens against predators; read of his indefatigable

hospitality to walkers, whom he also housed, in huts; his service to meteorology, to the Fire Department, to Search and Rescue teams. Consult the visitors' book at Melaleuca, and the local reverence for Deny (his saintly aspect) is unquestionable.

What some might question is the idea of Deny King's 'isolation.' For it was an isolation that included eighty-five visitors of the ragged and worn attending a New Year's Eve party; isolation also included visits from the Quality: Sir Edmund Hillary, Jacques Cousteau, Nan Chauncy, Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis, Max Angus and Patricia Giles. Climbers, divers, writers, artists came, and royalty too when Lord Snowden visited, taking photos for his *Tasmanian Essay*. But between the lines the difficulties of living and loving provide moments of emotionally painful reading. The pure ideality of wilderness could not sustain the social and cultural isolation felt by Margaret once her two girls reached school age. When Deny sailed into Hobart to see his daughter for the first time, Margaret presented him with a baby — and a house in Sandy Bay. And so begins a poignant story of intermittent separation and contrapuntal loyalties in which Deny and Margaret seek to occupy two worlds.

Biography might once have belonged to kings but generically it's a mongrel form. A kinder way to state that is to say it embraces diversity. Diaries, photographs, newspapers, oral histories, all come together in this celebration of one man's life. To the list we should add another genre, the owner's repair manual. No doubt about it, Deny admired machinery: the first thing he did when Margaret visited Melaleuca was to show her a four cylinder Southern Cross engine. He owned a D2 Caterpillar tractor that charges in and out of the narrative like an abbreviated Star Wars offsider. Travelling in Western Australia Deny photographed a grader; in Chile he 'thrilled to see the huge machinery and furnaces at Chuquicamata, the world's largest open-cut copper mine.' Of course, for a miner, concern for labour-saving machinery is understandable and the logistics involved in transporting tonnage to the southwest and then manoeuvring it across buttongrass plains would daunt anyone other than an Engineering Artificer. But the editor did a disservice to the text in omitting work submitted by Mattingley, because what this biography lacks is the poetry promised by the title, 'king of the wilderness.' The major achievements are there: Deny's reputation as a naturalist includes having the *Banksia Kingii* named for him. It's a plant thought to have become extinct 38,000 years ago. And then there's *Kings Lomatia*,

<p>REVIEWED BOOK: CHRISTOBEL MATTINGLEY, KING OF THE WILDERNESS: THE LIFE OF DENY KING, TEXT, 2001</p>

the oldest known plant clone, now protected by an act of parliament. The plant names are living testaments to Deny's native genius, but the emphasis promised by the title is underrepresented in the text.

In 1982 the southwest attained World Heritage listing. The strip around Melaleuca remained a conservation area, which meant Deny could continue mining and living in his Nissen home. Toward the end of his life, the man's battle — which seldom if ever was with the 'wilderness' — seems increasingly a battle with a mean-spirited bureaucracy, and the conservation / preservation conflicts provide a subtle study of the effect of gradual human impact on the region. As the author states: 'Deny, an unwitting arch-agent of change, watched as daily landings on his airstrip increased and up to fifty people packed his huts at night.' The airstrip (built with the help of the intrepid D2) allowed emergency service accessibility; it also allowed Nomads and Caribous (names which highlight the absurdist aspects of the situation) to bring in tourists — and the European black rat. Deny himself imported the foxglove, an environmental weed.

These are small moments in the bigger picture Deny witnessed during a trip to Nepal, aged seventy-one: above his head, the peaks of Annapurna and Machhapuchare, at his feet the litter and faeces of trekkers. Last April, while Ben Maloney was making news I slept in one of Deny's huts, a far cry from 'thawing clay' because Deny's rock fireplace was near-rubble. Cold weather was an olfactory blessing, however, because the privy he'd built hadn't seen sawdust since 'snigging' ceased to be an occupation. Deny abhorred neglect; the southwest was his *oikos*, his 'home-land' and he kept a weather eye over the transients and migrants that came his way, be they thawing clay or orange-bellied parrots. The loss of Deny's voluntary stewardship, his recording of shifts in ecological register on a daily basis, can never be replaced by occasional visits from Parks and Wildlife to the area.●

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