

## The Roper River Road and Janba's Deed

*"Police and Aboriginal trackers yesterday afternoon lost the trail of a man they believe killed an Aboriginal teenage girl and wounded a jackaroo at Elsey Station in the Northern Territory on Saturday . . . The Aboriginal . . . is a skilled bushman capable of getting within feet of a wild animal without being detected. If he finds his way across the Arnhem Land escarpment before being cut off he could hide up for months or even years. The country abounds with wild life and adequate water."*



Dilapidated Metal House at Roper Bar

On a certain night in 1969, Dan and I turned off the Stuart Highway in the Northern Territory of Australia and took the Roper River Road across to the Roper Bar and the border of Arnhem Land near the Gulf of Carpentaria on the Arafura Sea. It was a desolate road through arid bush country, and when we came upon a small cluster of lighted tents belonging to a group of land surveyors, we played it safe and stopped to yarn a bit and inform them we would be taking that lonesome road, expecting to be back the next day. The surveyors were intelligent and curious chaps, insatiable in their desire to find out precisely why we should want to do what we were doing. We talked a long time, eventually discovering that one of them had chauffeured the late Professor William Brown, then of Cornell University, but later at Harvard where, a dozen or so years earlier, he had been working on ants in Australia in the central deserts.

In the course of the conversation I asked them if the law had caught the bushman who hatcheted his tribal wife to death one Sunday morning at the Elsey Cattle Station near there, and severely injured the white jackaroo with whom she had been sleeping. They said he had not yet been seen, even though an army of people had been searching for him. We somehow felt a little relieved, and noticed that one of the surveyors added thoughtfully, "She was his tribal wife, you know." Everyone grunted, and we got the definite idea that most of them agreed with us that in this clash of two kinds of law the jackaroo had been some kind of fool, even if the bushman had also gone far beyond his rights. I recalled that one of the anthropological articles I had read about Aboriginals had indicated that, in the old days, if a man had been wronged in this fashion, unless he took on the man responsible, he himself might be killed by his own relatives, presumably for making the whole family appear as cowards in a social environment marked with intergroup hostilities. Who knows, I thought, what ideas about right and wrong go through the mind of a

man in the halfway land changing from one culture and set of laws to another when he spies his tribal wife, a teenage girl still only halfway a woman, in the arms of another man?

The rules of marriage in historically polygynous Aboriginal society have a different background from those of European societies. We have a difficult enough time deciding what actions are justified when such complications are not involved. While I was thinking about it, one of the surveyors said, a little sadly, "Aboriginals are extremely social people. All the police have to do is wait. He'll come back to his people sooner or later." I thought about that and realized that what he really meant is that no man can easily live alone, perhaps, least of all, people as friendly, social, and kin-bound as, apparently, are the Aboriginals of Australia. It didn't really matter that Larry Janba had been described in the newspapers as "well armed" and able easily to get along in the bush. No man could fail to feel a little sympathy for that Aboriginal, and I ended up putting my feelings into the following verse.

I sing this song from a variation to the tune of *Utah Carroll*.

### Janba's Deed

In the Northern Territory where the Roper River wanders  
Through the Eucalyptus bush-land flowing eastward to the sea  
Where the dreaded taipan threads the grass and crocodiles plunder  
And the flying foxes muster in the Melaleuca trees.

High along that winding river, on the Elsey Cattle Station  
Lovely in her nubile promise lived a lubra in her teens  
And her every glance and movement was the jackaroo's temptation  
Though her tribe's own laws had pledged her to a bushman black and lean.

The bushman was a proud man and the jackaroo a fool  
But the station life was easy and the walkabout was cruel  
Who could blame her for confusion, caught between such different worlds  
Was she lubra, was she lady, was she woman or a girl?

In the bosom of the bushman burned a passion for his people  
And an unrelenting hatred for the lubras who at night  
When the stockmen came in trucks and flashed their lights across his people  
Would arise with stealthy glances and depart the fireside's light.

The jackaroo made promises the bushman knew were lies  
But all that he could offer was a nomad's dying cause  
A campfire and a shelter out beneath the dreamtime skies  
Where people laughed and chattered, and tried to keep their sacred laws.

Whether law or fury moved him, scarcely any man could blame him  
When the bushman found his lubra sleeping with the jackaroo  
Drove his hatchet in their bodies and departed sad and grim  
From the white man's law went fleeing through the bush he loved and knew.

All across the Territory, as the bushman's deed was told  
There were men of every creed who might have done the same that day  
There were men of every color hoping that his luck would hold  
That he'd cross the Arnhem escarpment where no white man knew the way  
And where no white man's law held sway.

This verse was written before Janba was caught. True to the surveyor's prediction, he came back on his own, and apparently peacefully, after the chase was discontinued. Some time after we returned from our side trip to the Gulf of Carpentaria, the following item appeared in the Darwin newspaper:

*Aboriginal Larry Janba, 30, was sentenced to eight years gaol today for a hatchet attack which killed*

### Janba's Deed

In the Nor - them Ter - ri - to - ry where the Ro - per Ri - ver wan - ders  
 through the Euc - a - lyp - tus bush - land, Flow - ing east - ward to the sea,  
 where the dread - ed Tai - pan threads the grass and cro - co - di - les plun - der  
 And the fly - ing fo - xes mus - ter in the Me - la - leu - ca trees.

*his tribal wife and wounded a white jackaroo . . . Mr. Justice Blackburn in Darwin Supreme Court . . . said Janba had lost his self control when he found his tribal wife and Jackson sleeping in the same room . . . in the white quarters at Elsey Cattle Station on September 21 . . . 'You have led a blameless life in the past and . . . there is little reason why you should commit this horrible crime again,' he said."*

An article by American anthropologists, published around the time of Dan's and my work on the Australian continent depicts the Australian Aboriginals as communal, mate-sharing, peaceful people who regulated their birth rates so as not to overcrowd the landscape and overtax their resources; and who never fought over "space." Perhaps not over "space," because space is probably the cheapest and most available commodity in Australia. There is plenty of evidence that Aboriginals fought over waterholes. Nor did they "share mates," at least in the sense supposed by these anthropologists, who could probably read of killings resulting from "unfaithful" women in the world's newspapers yet today whether or not they spent time in Australia. Finally, as with all humans that are well understood, they apparently did seek to destroy other groups, particularly less closely related ones, when this behavior involved likely gain. In a Cambridge, England, symposium, in which I participated in 1987, an Australian anthropologist stated that nearly 30 per cent of Australian Aboriginal males were killed by other Aboriginal men. It is generally believed now that, despite the slaughters of two world wars, the twentieth century mortality rates from wars, genocides, and other grim causes of death comprised an average of several thousand deaths *per day*. Yet the *rates* of such fatalities were still lower, not higher, than in pre-industrial humans.

Norman B. Tindale was an entomologist working at the museum at the University of Adelaide. I knew of his work with mole crickets before we went to Australia. In 1928, the year before I was born, he had published a substantive paper on the mole crickets of Australia. Subsequently he was assigned to accompany some anthropologists to help bring back Aboriginal artifacts from an island off the northern coast of Australia. He was so successful in this role that he was transferred to the anthropology division of the museum and began to study Aboriginals. Dan and I talked with him when we visited the Adelaide museum, and eventually named an ant-loving cricket in his honor. One day, while we were discussing