

1974 A CYCLONE NAMED TRACY

Cyclone Tracy smashed into Darwin while its children were in bed dreaming of the gifts Santa was bringing them. At shortly after midnight on 25 December 1974, they were awakened by cataclysmic winds exceeding 217 kilometres an hour which, during the next two terrifying hours, ripped the city apart.

'At 5 a.m. Tracy was finished', reported Bruce Stannard in the *Australian*. 'So was Darwin. People emerged into something like the devastated landscape of Hiroshima or Flanders' No-Man's-Land. With the first light of dawn they saw that not one house, not one single solitary structure was intact.'

It was the greatest natural disaster to strike an Australian city: 49 people killed, 16 missing, hundreds injured, 35 000 evacuated, and 90 per cent of buildings destroyed or severely damaged.

The Acting Prime Minister, Dr J. F. Cairns, reflected the mood of the city's people when he pledged the following day that Darwin would be entirely rebuilt.

A nationwide appeal for aid was launched. The Darwin Reconstruction Commission was set up by the Federal Government to co-ordinate the massive rehousing project and to ensure that the new city would be able to withstand winds blowing at up to 55 metres a second.

In the three years that followed, over \$700 million was spent on rebuilding Darwin, which today thrives once more with elegant new buildings, wide streets, plenty of pubs, and a tropical casualness which has attracted many new residents.

Tracy was not the first of the huge revolving tropical storms to hit Australia's most northern port.

Twice before, in 1897 and 1937, Darwin was laid waste — but each time, with a rebellious determination which still refuses to yield even to nature at its most powerful, the inhabitants rebuilt their city.

And such is their pioneering spirit, that even in calamity, Darwinians are certain to find something humorous — as reflected by an item published in the *Northern Territory Times* after the first big cyclone which claimed twenty-eight lives:

Palmerstonians were seriously informed a few days ago by a visiting lay preacher that the recent cyclone was a gentle reminder from Providence that we are a sinful people. That looks like 'rubbing it in' with a venge-*

ance, but the answer is found in the fact that Providence levelled all the places of worship and didn't leave us a square foot of Church fit to pray in. This particular feature of the cyclone rather upsets all the best brands of theology. If storms are to be gauged by the wickedness of a community a new and interesting field is opened up for weather prophets.

Irreverent, perhaps, but rather fitting for a place named after that questioning scientist, Charles Darwin.

**Darwin's name until 1911 was Palmerston*