

THE WIDELY ACCLAIMED STORY
OF RAW, BUSTLING LIFE IN AN
INNER-CITY SUBURB OF SYDNEY



KYLIE TENNANT



FOVEAUX

FOVEAUX

KYLIE TENNANT



Other novels by Kylie Tennant

RIDE ON STRANGER

THE BATTLERS

TIBURON

THE MAN ON THE HEADLAND

TELL MORNING THIS

THE HONEY FLOW

THE JOYFUL CONDEMNED

LOST HAVEN

TIME ENOUGH LATER

*All characters in this book are
entirely fictitious, and no reference
is intended to any living person.*

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C O N T E N T S

PROLOGUE 9

BOOK I: EBB TIDE 15

BOOK II: FULL TIDE 101

BOOK III: THE SURF 215

BOOK IV: THE ROCKS 317

THE WIDELY ACCLAIMED STORY
OF RAW, BUSTLING LIFE IN AN
INNER-CITY SUBURB OF SYDNEY



KYLIE TENNANT



FOVEAUX

Kylie Tennant's lively, humorous
 slum of Foveaux: its terraces spil
 streets; its dingy pubs and factor
 shops... and its crowd of memorable characters such as

Honest John Hutchinson the master of municipal
 skulduggery and Bob Noblett the alcoholic barrowman...

"There is now no municipality of Foveaux. Its boundaries
 are obliterated, its identity merged with that of the city of
 Sydney. But in 1912 Foveaux still had its own council, its
 own mayor, and even, some maintained, its separate
 smell..."

"A wholly exceptional piece of work."

SUNDAY TIMES

"A rich slice of Sydney suburban life, teeming with colourful
 characters... and beautifully told."

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

"Those people! How full of interest for us Kylie Tennant
 makes them..."

BRISBANE COURIER-MAIL

"Whether writing about the tramps moving from town to town or
 the inhabitants of the Sydney slums, she left us a canon of work that
 is as relevant today as when the stories were first written."

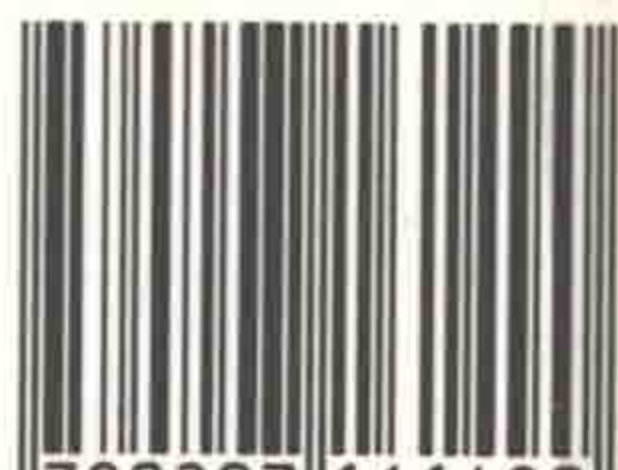
Richard Mackay,

BOOK MAGAZINE



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FICTION

KYLIE TENNANT
1912–1988

Kylie Tennant bequeathed an awesome array of literary work to posterity. Her determination to write about life as it was has been likened by some critics to that of John Steinbeck, especially *The Grapes of Wrath*. She was blessed with an incisive eye for character and a wonderful sense of humour which saved her stories of misery and hopelessness from seeming pessimistic.

Kylie Tennant's concern was with the individual's life amidst the wider community and it was the ebb and flow of life which she wished to convey rather than the individual struggles. . . . Whether writing about the tramps moving from town to town or the inhabitants of the Sydney slum, she left us a canon of work that is as relevant today as when the stories were first written."

Richard Mackay,
The Book Magazine

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*This is the littoral, the long pale shore,
The gleaming sand, the cliffs where shallow foam
Mutes in its murmurings the rousing roar
Of curved green crests that crashed the proud ship home,
The silver sandhills, where, uneasily,
The land receives the rejects of the sea.*

PROLOGUE

There is now no Municipality of Foveaux. Its boundaries are obliterated, its identity merged with that of the city of Sydney. But in 1912 Foveaux still had its own council, its own mayor, and even, some maintained, its separate smell. That last, however, might have been due to Ogham Street, basking like a wicked snake at the foot of the fair hill on which Foveaux was set. Upon the network of alleys around Ogham Street and the black chimneys of the factories Upper Foveaux looked down secure in the sunlight. The factory smoke simmered hazily on the skyline, and the factory whistles sounded faintly up Lennox Street, like timid bugles blowing an advance; but the factories, clustered round the foot of the hill, hung back as though daunted by that steep scarp.

Towards Dennison Square — a star-shaped tangle of traffic on the Hilltop, much like any other business centre except for a queer predominance of piano shops and pawn shops — Murchison Street made its way from the city at the foot of Foveaux. Lennox Street, a more direct route from the city, remained a quiet residential road and a suffering in the flesh for those who had to climb it. To stand at the foot of Lennox Street and see it going up and up, as though it would burst against the skyline in a shower of roadmetal, gave you the feeling of watching a fountain or a waterfall — a feeling that it might spout even higher or alternatively pour over you. Particularly was this so after a storm when the brown water came creaming down the gutter and spread roaring, fan-shaped waves across the footpath.

Foveaux had grown used to Lennox Street, the way it spouted up as though to touch the stars, and then dwindled to a miserable little lane that crept to Errol Street between the wall of St Matthew's Church grounds and the garden of

Foveaux House. It was this bottle-neck choking off the traffic that kept the upper part of Lennox Street such a quiet residential area. Here the Reverend Dr Wilbram, Mr Foxteth, K.C., the Agnews and the Hugheses could dwell secure from any other incursions than that of the rabbit which resided among the élite. The rabbit was as sure of itself as the pigeons wheeling above the steep slope of the convent roof just around the corner in Mark Street. There, over the towering stone walls and the great shut gates, the magnolias dropped their pale petals; and if you were a small boy standing on tiptoe, you might just see the white statue in its niche high up where the pigeons flew, or through a chink glimpse a strip of green lawn where walked mysterious black-clad women, their beads jinking, their coifs and hoods like strange wings folded.

Young Tommy Cornish always confused the bunny rabbit in the churchyard with the mythical beast the rector had been tracking through the Book of Revelations for many studious years. The rector lived in a legend of the Apocalypse from which he would emerge each Sunday to lead his flock through a maze of allegorical explanations and Greek roots. Foveaux was proud of the rector, his horned beast and his notable Greek.

In the long summer evenings the rector and Mr Sutton of Foveaux House would often watch for the rabbit to bob its white tail amid the grass.

"Did you see him?" Mr Sutton would say placidly over the fence and his cigar.

"I almost believe I did," the rector would respond, adjusting his pince-nez on the high bridge of his nose. "He ran from that honeysuckle."

A deep, golden silence would descend, and then the rector never failed to remark:

"I must have that bush removed. The place is a perfect wilderness."

Indeed, except for the path his flock kept clear from the gate to the church porch, there was little sign of human comings and goings. The whole church might have been just a great stone, covered with ivy and crumbling into the grass. The wooden pickets of the fence, once white painted, were rotted

a dead grey. One in every three was missing while the remainder hung insecurely by a nail each. It was a habit with the Foot of Foveaux to wrench a picket from the church fence any time there was a shortage of firewood.

"Little beast doesn't do any harm." Mr Sutton would break silence. "Eats the roses sometimes."

Mr Sutton's grounds were a great contrast to those of St Matthew's. His house was the finest in Foveaux and the oldest. Hildebrand Edward Sutton had lived in Foveaux House ever since it descended to him from that line of Suttons who had once held all Foveaux as their estate. Not only did he own the big house and its grounds, but there was a large share of the firm of Sutton, Targis and Underwood, Box Manufacturers, at the Foot of Foveaux, to his credit. It was difficult to connect Hildebrand Edward Sutton, very spruce and elegant in his grey top hat and his grey morning coat, with anything so prosaic as a factory. Factories belonged down near Ogham Street and Mr Sutton belonged to his ornamental fountain and his flower-beds. Around him Upper Foveaux breathed a rarefied air, while below it Middle Foveaux, with rows and rows of terraces, separated the higher altitudes from the Foot. In those happy days, when you spoke of people "going downhill" it might literally mean that they were moving into a house below Mary Street or, perhaps, even lower down past Slazenger Street where the horse buses ran. They might even end up in Plug Alley with Hamp and Mrs Sampson and Joe and Chink.

The Rose of Denmark, on the lower left-hand corner of Slazenger Street, was the meeting-place of Middle Foveaux and the Foot. Here presided Jordan True, under whose equal hospitality the dwellers of Plug Alley and Ogham Street might mingle with parched respectability: and Mr Merrill or Bob Budin, returning homeward with his bag of tools, would find himself gazing over the beer mug into the unlovely visage of Curly Thompson or Blue Jack. A yellow wasps' nest on the corner was the Rose of Denmark; a wasps' nest where gathered not only thirsty souls in search of nectar but dark, weaponed men in search of plunder. The place was a landmark for nervous policemen.

Beside the Rose of Denmark a narrow stone stair ran down

into Plug Alley and from this stair entrance might be gained by knocking in a special manner. It was from this stair that Curly Thompson threw the Rose of Denmark's barman, as shall presently be told.

"I wouldn't mind them murderin' each other so much," Mrs Blore complained, "if they wouldn't throw stones on the roof."

From the stair the iron roofs below made a delightful target.

A little above the Rose of Denmark, but spiritually breathing the air of Upper Foveaux, was the Misses Dimiter's school. The Misses Dimiter had kept their select girls' school in Lennox Street when only the "nicest people" lived there; and refined families who had moved out of Foveaux still sent their little, pigtailed offspring to the Misses Dimiter as their mothers had been sent before them. Year by year the Misses Dimiter won the most famous scholarships. Year by year their girls topped the examinations in Hebrew and German and Greek. The Misses Dimiter believed in Solid Attainments, and they continued to turn out German scholars who would spend the rest of their lives doing fancy work and prodigies of Greek who would forget it all with the arrival of the first baby.

At the head of a sedate crocodile the Misses Dimiter every Sunday led the school boarders up to St Matthew's Church, while half Lennox Street leant admiringly over the balcony rail and the other half stood in an odour, not of sanctity, but Sunday dinner, in the front doorway.

"Never forget," the Misses Dimiter's pupils were instructed, "that a lady is proved a lady by the way she wears her gloves." The Misses Dimiter gave tone.

So did Mrs Isador in a different way. Her establishment, one block above the Misses Dimiter's, was also very select. Her young ladies, if they did not come from the best families, were at least intimately associated with some of them. They were very beautiful young ladies, even better behaved than the Misses Dimiter's. They did not walk out in crocodiles. They seldom went out at all. They spent their time entertaining visitors, very select visitors, who drove up in cabs and had to present their introductions. It is difficult to say which Foveaux admired more, the young ladies of the Misses Dimiter or those of Mrs Isador.

If the Foot of Foveaux had the Rose of Denmark as a landmark, Middle Foveaux had Mr Keyne's palm-tree. Every time a hurricane thrashed up Lennox Street, and the little terrace gardens went sailing off in a swirl of mud and water, their owners would crouch to the fire muttering: "I wonder if Mr Keyne's palm-tree is all right?" and half expecting to help pick the bodies of Mr Keyne's family from under a deluge of brick and tile when the palm finally fell across the roof.

Someone had once warned Mr Keyne that the telephone department might cut his tree down if it obstructed their wires. Mr Keyne got in first and wrote to the department, telling them to take their telephone away as the wires were interfering with his tree. The telephone department solemnly sent out an expert to see what could be done, and the joke lasted Mr Keyne for years, while the tree soared up and up.

"You go down past Mark Street," the stranger would be directed, "until you come to the place with the palm-tree. Three houses further along is a lane, with the wood-and-coal shop on the corner, and the barber's is just opposite."

There were shops on every corner. Clusters of shops. But of the three hundred houses along Lennox Street most were in the form of clay-coloured terraces. There was a certain quaintness in the ornate wrought iron, gilded and tortured into balcony rails, edgings, cornices, and any possible projection, until the houses looked as though they had been trimmed with mouldy lace. In these terraces the builders had resolutely striven to preserve all the narrow discomforts of Victorian architecture. The doors and windows successfully defended the houses against the entrance of light and air. The halls were measured to allow one human body to pass through at a time, the stairs were steeper than Lennox Street. The great success was the roofs, pitched to allow for the fall of snow; though as Nosey Owen pointed out, "The only 'snow' in Foveaux is what they sniff down in Ogham Street."

Uniformity had been observed even where Lennox Street disconcertingly skirted a sheer drop into Plug Alley. Here the enterprising pioneer builder had apparently taken a lesson from the swallows and, while insisting on his usual three-storey plan, with an area in the basement for the servants, he had