

relax with a book



Robert Hefner

## Litbits

Sixty years ago today the armed merchant cruiser HMS *Jervis Bay* was sunk in the North Atlantic by a German battleship. Two years later Michael Thwaites published his narrative poem, *The Jervis Bay*, praised by one critic as "a poem that will live". The poem has remained in print ever since in the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Thwaites will read a section of the poem on ABC radio 2CN on Friday morning.

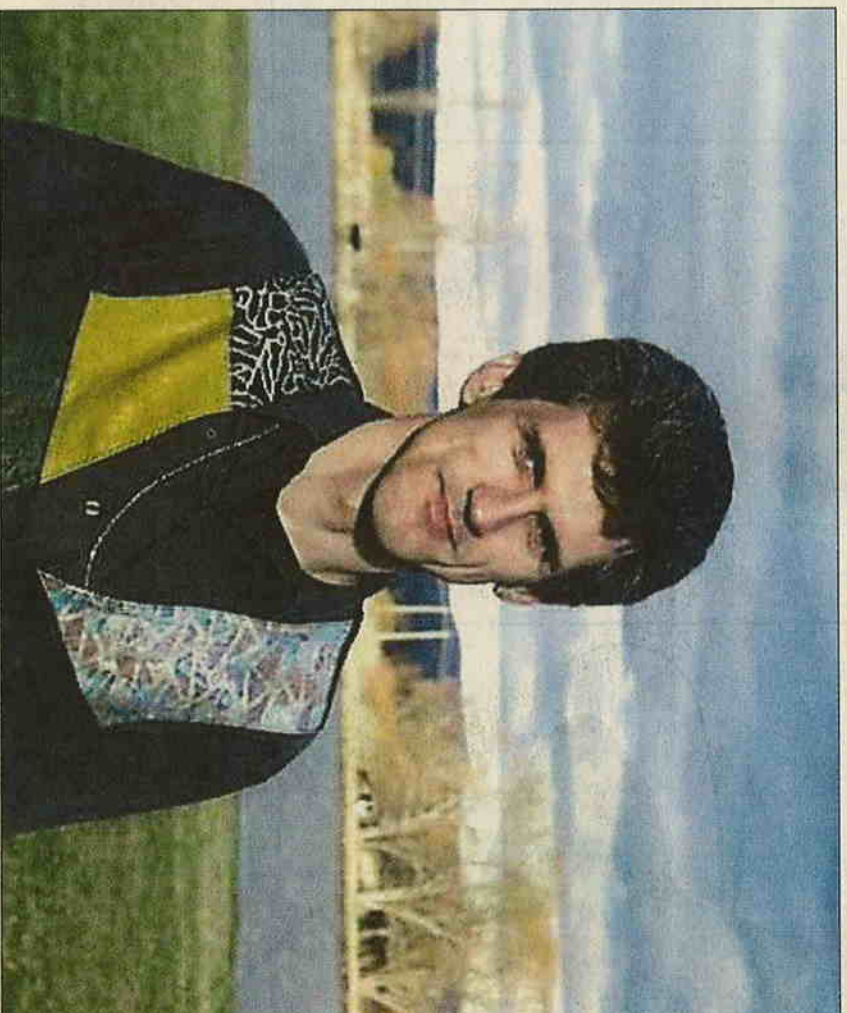
■ Congratulations to ADFA senior lecturer Susan Lever and her table, who won the fourth annual Grand ACT Literary Quiz last weekend. Four tables tied for second place. The evening raised about \$2300 for the ACT chapter of PEN International. President Dorothy Johnston thanked those who supported PEN and had fun in the process.

■ Also on Wednesday, Speakeasy — a monthly performance poetry event — is on at the Rincon Latino Cafe, Garama Place, Civic, from 8pm. Entry is free, and there will be an open section after the featured poets.

■ Lots of book launches this week: Senator Margaret Reid will launch *The Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate 1901-1929*, edited by Ann Millar, at 6pm tomorrow in the Great Hall, Parliament House; Professor Ann Curthoys will launch *Class and its Others*, edited by J. K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, on Tuesday at 5 for 5.30pm at the Co-op Bookshop, ANU; American Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm will launch *The Ideal of Alexis de Tocqueville*, by Manning Clark, on Thursday at 11am at Manning Clark House. Forrest Ken Inglis and Deborah Bird Rose will launch *My Dark Brother: The Story of the Illins, a Russian-Aboriginal Family*, by Elena Govor, on Thursday at 5 for 5.30pm at the Co-op Bookshop, ANU; and Michael Gladwin will launch *A Fading Blue Star*, by Jacob Hankinson, on Saturday at 2pm at Havelock House, Turner.

■ Reminder: Frank Moorhouse will speak about his new novel, *Dark Palace*, on Monday, November 13 at 12.30pm at University House, ANU. Bookings: 6249 5491. And novelists Robert Drewe, Candida Baker and Rodney Hall will read at Tilley's, Lynelham, on Tuesday, November 14, from 8pm. Bookings: 6249 1543.

■ Tomorrow is the deadline for submissions for the ANU Poets' Lunch, planned for December 6. The theme is Millennium Dreaming. Short poems are preferred. Send entries to Eliza Waterford at ANU Public Affairs, eliza.waterford@anu.edu.au



Craig Cormick who explores the interface between fact and fiction in *Kurikka's Dreaming*.

# THE COLONY OF FAILED utopian dreams

Christopher Bantick discovers how one man's vision turned sour and ended in frustration and bitterness.

Utopianism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries has left an indelible mark on Australian colonial attitudes. Perhaps the best known of the English Fabians who opted to reside in Australia was William Lane. Arriving in Brisbane in 1885, Lane led the New Australia and Cosme utopian settlements in Paraguay.

Less familiar is the story of Matti Kurikka, the subject of Craig Cormick's new novel, *Kurikka's Dreaming*.

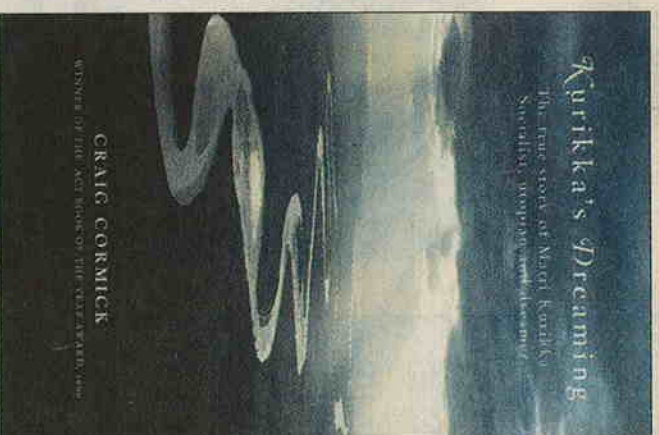
Kurikka was a 19th-century dreamer and visionary who left his native Finland in 1899 and arrived in Queensland in the same year with a hundred of his followers. His ambition was to establish a utopian colony in Queensland and he believed that, with the support of his followers, he could recreate in Australia the mythic land of the Finnish folk epic, the *Kalevala*.

He had formidable powers of persuasion. His followers left their Russian-controlled homeland and opted to go with him with the hope of setting up a society based on the promise of independence, equality and prosperity. The results, Cormick shows, were very different.

The novel explores the interface between fact and fiction. Cormick invites the reader to share with him something of the writing process of imagining Kurikka. This is done through Cormick, as author, entering the narrative. Cormick's provision of explanatory background details and information enhances Kurikka's story, as related by the characters.

Cormick said one of his challenges in writing the story was to find the right voice for Kurikka. This was made more difficult as little was known about him or could be readily salvaged from the sources of the past.

"Although I had some facts about his life for some time — that he was born in eastern Finland in 1863 and studied at the University of Helsinki where he found a deep interest in



socialism, for example — the story failed to work until I could pin the voice down."

"I needed a voice with a sense of hurt in it. This came through creating one of his followers who had fallen under his spell but over time had become disillusioned with him and no longer believed in the dream."

The story of Kurikka is related by two characters in the narrative. One is his daughter Aili and the other is Risto, the follower who fell away.

Structurally, the idea of having dual voices as narrators, Cormick said, was critical to the way the story evolved.

"The problem I had was how to find Kurikka in the past and bring him into the present. The solution was for me not to speak about him directly. I gave this responsibility to others. Aili and Risto are two extremes and they come at Kurikka from two very different angles."

Kurikka was a charismatic man but a failed leader. He was able to convince people to come with him to Australia, but he didn't establish the utopian colony. Within the first year, it had fall-

en to pieces. Kurikka, disillusioned, frustrated and with some bitterness, left Queensland and seeded utopian settlements in North America.

The fact is that Kurikka couldn't deliver on his socialist-inspired vision in Australia and had limited success elsewhere. This, Cormick said, was important in understanding the man.

"He was a flawed visionary. A lot of utopians are flawed as leaders. Then again, maybe the expectations on him were too great. He gave his followers the vision they wanted. It came at a time when people in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were abandoning religion.

"Salman Rushdie says that this left a religion-shaped hole in people which was filled as best they could."

The novel, while being about the life of Matti Kurikka, is essentially concerned with questions relating to belief. People followed Kurikka, Cormick said, as "the promised what they believed he could give."

If believing in something outside yourself is central to *Kurikka's Dreaming*, then why Kurikka's utopian experiments failed is important to see in a context beyond the novel. The failure to meet rising expectations is superficially why his Queensland followers left him. But Cormick subtly shows that no matter where you placed the utopian colony, you would import the causes for its failure. This, he said, was to do with our fallen humanity.

"In trying to reject society, Kurikka brings with him the very things he wanted to leave behind."

These were the tensions which finally drove a wedge between his followers. Internal dissent, combined with infertile soil in the far north Queensland interior, put paid to the dreams of realising a society based on the *Kalevala*.

This was to be a magical time of heroes and golden prosperity. The result was infighting, bickering and, in Kurikka's own words, a "disappointment".

*Kurikka's Dreaming: The True Story of Matti Kurikka, Socialist, Utopian and Dreamer*, by Craig Cormick, Simon & Schuster, 217pp, \$24.95.

Cormick will speak on Wednesday at 12.30pm at the University of Canberra. \$5 admission includes wine and cheese lunch. Bookings by Tuesday, on 6201 2207 or 6201 5350.