



SLEEPERS by the tonne . . . a rude utopian awakening for Kurikka's followers.

# Utopia dreaming

Words **Brian Williams**

**T**HE trouble with being a utopian is there is no such thing as utopia. Thus it must be hard graft for ideologues, holding grand dreams of paradise but never seeing the promised land.

*Kurikka's Dreaming* is the story of one such utopian, the Finn Matti Kurikka who tried to found a perfect society in north Queensland in 1900.

It's an intriguing story written by Australian Capital Territory Book of the Year winner Craig Cormick, who has lived and studied in Finland.

Cormick struck a major problem with this chronicle — there are hardly any records of this bizarre venture.

With such a dearth of archival material, Cormick has been forced to dramatise part of the story. He has woven what he has found after years of research with what he presumes life was like for Kurikka and his followers.

Kurikka was a socialist and charismatic leader in Finland in the late 1800s. He had strong nationalist tendencies brought about by the harsh treatment meted out to Finns by the Russian occupiers of their land.

Kurikka came to Queensland in 1899 and was followed soon after by more than 100 immigrants who dreamt of beginning a free socialist society in a new world.

Cormick obviously was quite taken with Kurikka and consumed with finding out what made him tick. But to the practically minded, Kurikka's story is one of frustration and arrant stupidity.

Kurikka made every mistake possible. He took city people from arctic climes to the tough and steaming-hot mining town of Chillagoe in tropical far north Queensland. These desperate city folk would probably have struggled to realise their dream in the country they knew, let alone in this harsh place.

They somehow hoped to transpose the dream of a Finnish homeland based on a mythic Finnish folk epic to "a land of eternal summer".

They had little money, few understood the language, they were unused to hard work, had limited skills and found the heat almost intolerable.

Like all those who rely on others to find answers to their problems in life, they were sure to be disappointed.

At Chillagoe, the predominant Anglo-Saxon population considered the weird Finns — who



MATTI Kurikka and wife, Anna.

wanted to speak their own language and live their own culture — one step up the social ladder from the Chinese

Kurikka had his group felling timber and cutting railway sleepers for a pitiful return. They knew so little of what they were doing that at one stage they provided useless softwood sleepers instead of hardwood as required.

Another time they stacked sleepers near a creek bank not knowing the monsoon was looming. Again, all their labours were wasted as the entire lot was washed away in a night.

The great quest lasted but a mere eight months. When everything had failed and his followers were beginning to despair, Kurikka led those who would still

follow on a bizarre foot slog westward into the "never-never", promising them paradise would surely be just over the next hill.

This was the last leap of faith for his followers. His dream had not become theirs. They were ruined financially and were in physical distress.

One suspects there probably also was some emotional upset, too, for although the handsome Kurikka had great ideals, he also had wandering hands and husbands had to keep a close eye on him at night as he crept about the tents.

At any rate, the trekkers luckily were found before they perished and Kurikka left them to look for Shangri-la in Canada.

It's worth noting that once away from the influence of Kurikka, many of the Finns chose better country on the Sunshine Coast hinterland and finally made a go of it.

Cormick has competently woven together an unconventional biography of Matti Kurikka as best he can. It's yet another chapter in Queensland's strange past.

More than anything, it's a salutary warning for dreamers that utopia remains just that — the stuff of dreams.

*Kurikka's Dreaming* by Craig Cormick is published by Simon & Schuster, \$24.95.