

## KIM DURACK, HIS LIFE AND HIS LEGACY

On 3 August 2011, the Kimberley Society heard from Patsy Millett, who is both the cataloguer of the Durack archival collection and a writer of biographies. Her output includes *The Duracks of Argyle: A summary of a pioneering venture and the years 1852 - 1950 in Kimberley, Western Australia*, which was published by Access Press, Bassendean (WA), in 2006 and will soon be reprinted. In conjunction with Naomi Millett, Patsy also edited *Pilgrimage: A journey through the life and writings of Mary Durack* (Bantam Books, Sydney, 2000). Her current work includes the completion of a biography of her uncle, Kim Durack (pictured). The talk presented to the Society drew on that work and is summarised below.



Born into a pioneering family, Kim Durack (1917- 1968) was the second son of Michael Patrick and Bess Durack. Educated at Christian Brothers College in Perth, it was taken for granted in his youth that, like his older brother Reg, he would eventually have some vital part to play in Connor Doherty and Durack ('CD&D'), the family pastoral firm. With this in mind, he decided with the encouragement of his father to undertake a course at Muresk Agricultural College. Thirty-seven years after he first ventured into East Kimberley, MP Durack had come to realise that the open-range grazing method involving hard mustering and long, dry droving treks, was an obstacle to the running of a profitable concern. It was supposed that a new 'scientific' approach might help overcome the predicament of poor cattle in an ever-poorer country for an industry already beset by distant markets, shortage of man-power and the on-set of depression. By the 1920s, the new hope for northern prosperity had become centred on the discovery of oil, the mirage of which happy dream was chased by Michael Durack and the CD&D shareholders to its last faint shimmer.

When in 1936, after completing three years at Muresk, Kim first entered the north he at once saw not only vast acres of 'wasted' land, but a land laid to waste by the long-held methods of pastoralists. A country which had in 1900 operated on a basis of one beast to 20 acres was three decades later supporting no more than one beast to 80 acres. Full of his newly acquired know-how and zeal, Kim sank the first plough into the CD&D soil for the purpose of experimenting with a variety of supplementary grasses, cotton and other crops. After some moderate success, he began a program of lobbying the Government for funds to establish a larger scale irrigation farm. In 1941 his efforts brought about, with his participation, the first survey for a suitable Ord River dam site.

This project sidelined by the more pressing problems of WW2, a modest Government budget was provided to set up an experimental farm on a portion of Ivanhoe station on the river front at Carlton Reach (where Kununurra now stands). Kim's initial goal of attending University and obtaining a science degree was by then set aside for what he saw as a more vital field endeavour.

Showing an extraordinary capacity for killing work, on a negligible salary and without manpower other than the assistance of his brother Bill, Kim established green fields of crops, principally sorghum and millet, supplied by water obtained by a primitive pumping system. The successful project saw much interest and enthusiasm from visitors to 'the irrigation show,' but differing views emerged as to how the scheme might be developed. Kim's focus at this stage was to supply year-round fodder in order to encourage the idea of 'store' cattle. He did not, like many an excited politician, see the north in terms of an Australian food or fruit basket in competition with Asian markets or established Australian industries. For the foreseeable future, it seemed the region was destined to be viable only for the pastoral industry and this would require silage and irrigation schemes. He was convinced that any more ambitious undertakings called for a painstaking process of mapping and assessing all the available water resources of East and West Kimberley and further long-term experimental projects before anything could be labelled as 'economic.' In this belief and with his complex vision of 'the right way to proceed' he became somewhat at odds with Russell Dumas, the state coordinator of Works and Industrial Development, who had backed him as the man to head a new era of closer settlement through agricultural expansion.

Among the Kim Durack files in the Durack family papers, 1886–1991, as held by the Battye Library (Call number Acc 7273A), are documents, letters and associated papers giving a full account of this early period, including the first survey for a dam and the establishment of the Carlton Reach farm. There are also verbatim transcripts by Kim's sister Mary of the arguments that arose between father and son over methods of improving the industry and the direction of the family company.

Leaving Carlton Reach for wider fields, Kim went to South Africa to study crop growing methods on similarly climate-affected land. On his return in 1947 he stood as an independent nominee for the Legislative Assembly seat of Kimberley, issuing a manifesto, 'A New Deal for the Kimberley.'

This position had been a long-term sinecure for a 'do-nothing and don't rock the boat' candidate. Kim was frustrated to find that many northern pastoralists, despite their difficulties, feared change of any kind and clung, like his father, to 'the old methods.' His bid for reform came at a time when, in many instances, the financial situation was too marginal to do anything other than stick to the status quo. He was defeated by a few votes.

Despite the efforts of his sons and daughters to prevent the move, in 1950 MP Durack sold the CD&D properties. The details of this end to a story which had begun seventy years earlier in Western Queensland and brought about the longest cattle trek in history are also covered in full in the Durack archives.

With the sale of the company, it appeared there was no further place in the north for Kim. He attempted, without success, to interest his brother Reg (who had retained a section of the Northern Territory holdings) in establishing an independent irrigation scheme at Kildurk Station. At the same time he began discussions with a number of men involved with a profitable Murray River rice-growing concern. They saw a man of considerable knowledge of northern conditions and experience with irrigated crops who might work on their behalf in a western extension of their business. Kim saw them as having the capital to assist him at a crucial time in further experiment. This, as shown by the preserved data, was the set-up for a likely grievous finale.

Now an employee of Northern Developments Pty. Ltd., Kim acquired a caravan and parked it under 'the foundation boab tree,' on a portion of Liveringa station in West Kimberley. The agreement to excise from the lease some of the best grazing country on Uralla Creek for testing the viability of growing rice came as a result of Kim's established friendship and association with the Rose family, who managed Liveringa.

For six years, with the assistance of a few transient labourers, Kim lived in his caravan and as at Carlton Reach, laboured mightily. The first problem of obtaining acclimatised seed to some extent overcome, there followed a continual battle against the ravages of birds and insects. The method used to counter the latter was by the liberal application of potent pesticides. Through seasons of drought and flood, he persevered, until the land sprang forth with waving fields of rice, mostly of the Magnolia and Zenith varieties. The first bag from Camballin was milled in 1953. After a visit to the site by Australian Rice Industry representatives W Rawlings and SR Bell, a glowing report advised the construction of a barrage dam and more permanent living quarters. Meanwhile, to strengthen his defences against the possibility of future conflict with his backers, Kim continued to buy Northern Development Co. shares with his £1,000 per annum salary.

The following year, on instructions from head office, Kim received a party of politicians, financiers and press. By this time a dam had been erected and a house built from local stone modelled on the Greek Parthenon was nearing completion.



'The Parthenon'

The enthusiasm and praise for Kim's heroic efforts unbounded, he was declared 'Man of the Day' by *The West Australian*. Unhappily for Kim, from correspondence over this period it seems the businessmen behind the project were not pleased to have the spotlight and applause concentrated on their 'Manager of Planting.' A 'visionary' of cautious bent was going to be harder to control than 'an employee.'

Nevertheless, the backers were happy to use the widely-held perception of Kim's personal integrity to obtain an agreement from pastoralists that allowed the Government to allot the first land in the Kimberley for 'agricultural purposes.' This was a tricky and obstacle strewn course, and at the time no one but Kim could have negotiated it. The funds for a large new dam obtained, Northern Developments wasted no time in printing a glossy prospectus to attract wider shareholders. At this juncture, the coming confrontation was seen by many as between the divergent pastoral and agricultural interests.

At the end of 1957 as a result of a Fitzroy River flood, the barrage dam collapsed. In sending advice to NDC about the disaster, Kim took it upon himself to call off a team of Eastern states growers already en route and dismiss another five controversially in situ. The company was informed that the ambitious goal of planting projected for the coming season was impossible under the circumstances. When following a wire in return, Kim refused the demand of Chairman Peter Farley that he continue regardless to declare the 500 to 1,000 acres achievable, a meeting was called. Present in Derby on Jan 24/58 were directors P. Farley, R. Rowell, K. Gorey with a proxy vote and Kim. With two votes recommending his authority cease immediately and R. Rowell abstaining, Kim found himself 'suspended.' The ground for this had been prepared in advance by an October '57 behind-the-scenes share juggle and a stacking and re-arranging of the NDC Board so that Kim, as majority shareholder, was out-numbered.



Kim Durack in flood waters

There is voluminous material covering this period, including a daily work diary kept by Kim and twenty-two letter books allowing for both ends of the business correspondence to be captured for posterity. Through the extracted, summarised and/or transcribed correspondence files, both business and personal, copies of inter-related material and data from other areas, a full and gripping picture emerges. Among these are the letters from his sister Elizabeth, who was staying with Kim at the time of the dam collapse, which give an account of the minute to minute drama of the situation. Relics of the enterprise: a tractor key, the first head of rice, airline tickets, lists of supplies and receipts, a battered suitcase etc, have survived the years.

At first supposing his dismissal merely 'a misunderstanding,' Kim gathered much public support and outraged denunciations of Northern Developments. However, this was countered by NDC who had found a Murray River farmer willing to declare the season's rice goal attainable. New manager, Keith Gorey, moved into 'the Parthenon' with his family and Kim resigned as a director of NDC. He then drew up a new irrigation scheme for the Lennard River, in West Kimberley. In preparation for this venture he began compiling maps and charts aimed at a comprehensive study of Northern water resources and travelled to Canberra to put these documents before Prime Minister Menzies. Initially, he was given a warm reception and his ideas were received with interest in Government circles.

At this time the Ord River Dam project was being strongly promoted by Sir Charles Court, Minister for the North-West in the Brand Government. Kim had long warned that the experimental stage had scarce begun and that a few crops raised at exorbitant cost could not justify such an extravagant scheme. A public war of words ensued between Kim and his supporters and Mr Court. Subsequently and likely consequently, Kim's plans were shelved at both a state and federal level.

From 1960, his life became a long and wearing saga of attempting to find anyone willing to listen to him or give him a job commensurate with his experience. It was later discovered that political power-brokers hostile to any opposition to an Ord River Dam had privately spread the word that he was an 'obstructionist' (to progress) and a 'possible security risk.' All doors were closed to him.

The papers written by Kim Durack on many aspects of water conservation, irrigation and northern development as presented to the state and federal governments are housed with the archival collection, as are the many original letters on file to and from Kim and Government ministers of the day. Correspondence with his mother and sisters, Mary and Elizabeth and his brother Bill capture all aspects of his continued, but soul destroying efforts.

From the point of Kim's departure, Northern Developments, under a series of new company names, fell into financial ruin. Documents and papers held in the Durack archives cover the on-going fiasco at Camballin, including sequential newspaper cuttings following the fortunes and misfortunes of US investor Jack Fletcher.

With the failure of Northern Developments, Kim's shares were rendered worthless. Possessing no funds other than those borrowed from family, he struggled on in Canberra, eventually accepting a lowly job with Parks and Gardens. A two-year engagement to an Ipswich girl was broken off as his prospects did not improve.

Kim then began his last journey into new frontiers of the mind. He took up an advanced study of mathematics, physics and philosophy and produced a number of impressively profound papers. Deeply enthralled by theosophy and theology, he spent the last years of his life writing a thesis, *An exercise in Refutation: Kant and the Ideal of Pure Reason*. All this work, much of it extraordinarily complex and beyond the mind of any but a few eminent academics with whom he corresponded, is preserved in the archives.

By 1967, Kim had become affected by a mysterious illness which was discovered to be A-plastic anaemia – a blood disorder likely acquired from unprotected contact with lethal pesticides. He died in 1968, just before his fifty-first birthday, and was buried in Canberra. From first to last, the story, as preserved in the voluminous files held by the State Library, is deeply engrossing and unbearably poignant.

Kim Durack's rational and scientific approach to the use and harnessing of not only the water resources of northern Australia, but nation-wide, is yet to be properly understood. History since he left the scene has showed that much of what he said and predicted has proved right and that there are yet lessons to be learned from his words, which stand as a legacy to past mistakes and future hopes.