

## **TO DAM OR BE DAMNED — THE MIGHTY FITZROY RIVER**

On 4 March 2009, Jack Fletcher spoke to the Kimberley Society about the events described in his recently launched book *To Dam or be Damned — The Mighty Fitzroy River*. His talk was accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation of slides that illustrated various phases of the biggest agricultural project ever undertaken in the West Kimberley's Fitzroy Basin. The notes that follow offer an opinion of the book.

This saga tells of a man with a great vision, a ton of guts and huge determination. It is written by him in his own inimitable and forceful style withholding no comments or criticisms. He displays his frustrations and his achievements, his wins and his losses with clarity and passion. There is nothing half hearted in this tale. Whether you agree with his view or not, it is hard not to admire his commitment to his vision and sincerity in pursuit of his goal.

In 1965 Art Linklater and a group of US investors recognised that there was a growing demand for food security and in particular a demand for quality beef. They commissioned Jack Fletcher, on the basis of his previous achievements, to fly to Australia and within a month put together a concept to address this need based on properties in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley. Jack came up with a vision to redevelop the Kimberley beef industry on the lines of the feedlot concept developed in Texas.

Eventually Jack was to pursue this vision with other partners. To do this he first assembled seven pastoral stations of total area of 4.3 million acres to provide the annual stock requirements for the venture. He identified an expanse of rich and fertile river flats on the Fitzroy River. These were supplied with water diverted by a barrage across the Fitzroy River. He tapped the underground aquifers to supplement his water supplies. This water was needed to apply to suitable crops (mainly grain sorghum) to supply the feedlot capable of handling up to 40,000 head of cattle annually. To protect his scheme from the roaring floods of a mighty Fitzroy River, he built a 10 mile levee, and further, to eliminate or at least minimise the risk of interruption to the water supply, he planned to build a dam on its upper reaches.

Jack found resistance to his ideas, his aggressive style and his Texan profile in many layers of the Government's political and bureaucratic arms, which frustrated his visionary plans. He failed to adequately comprehend the strength and depth of the ideological and negative forces that for bloody-minded reasons were pitched against him. He found it hard to accept that others in power could not see the merit of his project and the benefit it would bring to the State and National economy. He also struggled to get adequate and timely financial support to match the seasonal demands of his dream project despite his ability to demonstrate the underlying performance hurdles—though it wasn't for the lack of trying or of pursuit of innovative approaches.

The sight of his achievements in the face of the resistance was truly stunning. He demonstrated the crop yields necessary to achieve his goals. He demonstrated his ability to plan and construct the facilities and organisation to achieve his goals. He demonstrated he

could achieve the weight gain and quality in the Kimberley livestock. He demonstrated his ability to motivate men in the achievement of difficult tasks under very trying circumstances. Above all, he showed the value of vision and determination.

Eventually after the expenditure of over US\$60 million and 15-plus years of dedicated work, the project foundered on political bastardry, a mighty flood which destroyed the infrastructure of the project, and the inability for whatever reasons to establish sufficient stable financial support for the operation.

This book is a fascinating account of the struggle. In the early parts of the book (which is arranged in yearly chapters), Jack Fletcher tells with freshness and candour of his exposure to the new environment and his bewilderment of the attitudes prevailing in Australia at that time. He obviously appreciated the great support he received from the likes of Sir Charles Court, John Lewis, Roy Hamilton, and his staff and stockmen. He clearly showed his displeasure with the antics of Gough Whitlam, Frank Crean, Brian Burke and Julian Grill and others who stood in his way. The book contains many personal insights into the character of the author and reveals some of the principles that underpinned his actions.

Times have changed since 1983 – over 25 years ago. The cattle industry is in decline in the Kimberley. Native title and activism have put more barriers to development. Environmental activism has a stronger voice. But still the Fitzroy River flows past the rich floodplains that could aid the world in addressing its food needs. Who knows what the future holds. Who knows what the lasting effect would have been had Jack Fletcher achieved his dream.

I suspect we would now be more appreciative of his contribution.

*Peter Knight*

Editor's note: While we usually publish a summary after a talk is given to the Society, in this instance the book note conveys so much of the content and flavour of the talk that it is offered in lieu of a summary. Peter Knight is well positioned to offer comment on the book's content. He is an engineer who worked initially on the Ord River Diversion dam and is now a part time pastoralist with an interest in conservation and restoration.