



# Tiger Men

## Judy Nunn

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Yes, *Tiger Men* is about the stamping out of the Tasmanian tiger by three generations of men, most of whom arrived as convicts, men whose great-grandsons eventually pay a heavy price in WW1. But really the *Tiger Men* that Judy Nunn describes so vividly in her historical novel are Barons of Industry, the sons and daughters of first settlers who made their mark on Hobart through enlightened exploitation of natural resources – wool, timber, apples, and the rest.

**A** novel that spans three generations and more is going to be about history - how could it not be? But it's also intimately about human character. It's about the kind of men and women who were drawn to Tasmania and particularly to Hobart to make their fortune, recognising the raw opportunity of the place and milking it for much that it was worth. But *Tiger Men* is also about the way in which Van Diemen's Land and later Tasmania worked on these men and women, weaving them into its early society and – for many but not all – touching their souls.

Falling into three parts, the early period is peopled by colourful larger-than-life yet all too recognisable characters. Having been brought to Hobart by circumstance, most of them to serve time, they're soon drawn into life in the colony in a more or less transparent effort to get on in the world – largely through service or business. One character marries for money, or so we think, only for the plot to reveal that it had been for love all along. Another character, having hidden his shady past (pretty standard for those times), is put to the test when an employer who has genuine ideals takes him under his wing.

*Tiger Men* is a historical novel about tough times. Life was hard in those days – there was little room for sentimentality when the facts of life stared you down as if at every street corner, that icy wind from the south biting through your coat. While these Barons of Industry that Judy Nunn describes so well were strong and powerful, the women around them – often operating independently even while in their shadow – were often stronger than the men. Doris McLagan, for example, is a woman who rather than passively accepting her lot in life, as a plain daughter of a newly-made businessman, uses her passionate self-interest to rise above it – not dissimilar to the way some of Dickens' female characters respond to their fate. 'I deeply admire Doris McLagan', Judy Nunn admits.

Although the novel divides into three historical parts it's the middle Golden Age, from about 1870 to 1920, which Judy Nunn was initially engaged by as a quarry to mine. It is, she says, such a rich and colourful period, with relatively little written about it. Judy has always been drawn to a particular place in Australia, during a particular period - *Tiger Men* is her eleventh novel. Setting her story within a historical frame she fleshes out her plot through character and social history. Territory, for example, is set in Darwin between the annihilation that occurred when it was bombed in WW2, and Cyclone Tracy ripped through it just 32 years later. Set in the Snowy Mountains in the 1950s, another of her novels, *Heritage*, follows the wave of migrants employed by the Hydro-Electric Scheme. Many of them had been born in warring countries (eg Serbia and Croatia), making it all the more surprising when they band together despite their differences against a few badly behaved Australians and 'Paddies'. In both novels there is a strong theme of regeneration, of men and women creating a new and richer life after the reality of devastation – in Darwin after physical trauma and in the Snowy Mountains after enforced exile.

Like her earlier novels, perhaps even more so, *Tiger Men* is ambitious in its historical scale. Many of its themes are nonetheless familiar – overcoming personal adversity, establishing the means to make a stamp on society, seeking a personal sense of empire through founding a family. Perhaps the man who most closely exemplifies the *Tiger Men* that Judy Nunn is fascinated by during this Golden era is Henry Jones. While much is known about Henry Jones, importantly for a novelist not everything is known about him. His entrepreneurial spirit can be found everywhere in the novel, and not just in the character of Henry Jones – in various characters' rapacious even megalomaniacal spirit, their commercial expansion into every conceivable natural resource available for exploitation, and their apparent lack of remorse for damage done, both social and environmental.

Judy Nunn describes Henry Jones as 'the house that Jack built'. Using financial backing that was never made transparent, Jones initially ventures into orchards in the Huon Valley, followed by a jam factory in Hobart, then tin mines to make the tins to store the jam, and finally timber to make the crates to carry the jars to export the jam. Not forgetting, of course, the ships to export the crates of jam away in – on the drawing board at the time of this death. And yet, Judy points out, for all Jones' egomania, he also did good works. Despite his evident greed he still wanted to leave the world a better place.

What sort of men and women were they really, who walked about Hobart Town in the Golden Age? To answer this question properly you either need to be a historian or an avid student – or a reader willing to take the hand of Judy's narrator and be immersed in a story which can't help but leave you wiser about life in Southern Tasmania in the 19th and early 20th centuries. And, just in case there are any film producers out there, *Tiger Men* is just the kind of social saga that would make a riveting mini-series for television - giving far more depth and authentic sense of place than those films which are set in Tasmania largely for the scenery.

As Judy Nunn points out, the residents of Hobart during the Golden Age were not settlers who wanted to create a gracious and cultured life in the New World, having left gentile society behind. Hobart Town was not and never was Sydney Town. Hobart Town in the mid to late 19th century was peopled by men and women who clamoured for riches, and who would do just about anything to get them. And yet these were also men and women who had children who in turn grew up to face the horrors of WW1, some of whom returned – in the third part of this novel – as scarred men. These were men who, through the vagaries of war, transcended some of the unvarnished materialism of



their forefathers. 'Writing about war always makes me cry', Judy tells me. 'It helps, I think, being a bit older', she adds. Not because she feels hugely the wiser, but because age has given her a perspective on her characters which allows her to 'let them go' – to send them off on tangents that she herself wouldn't have been brave enough to pursue (in the 'I wish I could have done that' spirit). It also means that she's willing to ponder why a particular character is unable to let go of something in his or her own past (the novel has its share of life-long mourners).

But any more than this would be to give the game away – and spoil to the suspense that is integral to the 600-page-turner that this book is. The characters may not live happily ever after - who among us really do? However the end of the novel is, Judy promises, uplifting. It might keep your bedside light on, or possibly get you just that bit sunburnt on the beach, but it will be worth it.