

DOUG BUCKLEY

WITH JOS

A lot of people think my six years up at the Uni were a waste of time. About all I can say is there are a few more important things than an Arts degree. And anyway what about the Galileo Society? I was one of the blokes that started SUGS and I met Jos through it.

Considering who we were, SUGS attracted a pretty remarkable bunch of speakers really. At the start it was just the effect of the name we had dreamed up. Then after one of the blokes somehow or other got his old man to snag Isaac Asimov when he was in Sydney, we were well away. Mixed in with a few pseudo anti-intellectuals, we had Prince Leonard of Hutte, an old codger who'd found Lasseter's reef, that Russian astronomer bloke the publishers didn't like, and after a few resignations from the committee, Herman Kahn.

I suppose we were looking for something worth looking for. Or somebody. I was anyway.

Following the resignations I became Assistant Treasurer so I had to keep an eye out for new speakers. I used to put in the odd Sunday afternoon at the Domain and that's where I first ran across Jos.

There he was in his Harry Butler gear, standing on a bit of a box and holding forth earnestly to the drunks and the grass. A lot of stuff about how to pick up a ton of gold up the end of Cape York, the top of Australia like. But there was something about him that made me listen and it was like he was talking to me straight when he came to the offer: "Come up there with me and it's yours."

Doesn't that sound pretty straight-forward to you?

There was the odd patronising question. Why couldn't he go on his own? He already had as much as he wanted. Well why did he keep on fooling around with it? He wanted us to benefit too. What was the catch?

But I was starting to think there might not be a catch.

Maybe he was doing what he was doing because he was the bloke that he was.

Well I managed to work him into the SUGS speakers' programme but only a handful turned up on the day and it finished up a bit of a farce. No such thing as a free lunch and that. Though there was an economics student called Johann who was a bit of an exception. At least he listened.

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It wasn't that much of a shock when Johann turned up at Mascot soon after I did. Jos had given him a free ticket too. We got seats together up to Townsville.

Somewhere around Rockhampton he started to confide in me.

"I made sure I got a return ticket in advance from Jos. I'll get a free look at Townsville anyway." But I suppose I did not want to take him seriously on that.

It was raining in Townsville.

Jos met us in his Toyota 4WD, pretty perky. He was with a bloke called Brian who had arrived that morning from Melbourne. Brian got a bit on the sour side when he twigged what Johann was up to.

Anyway despite a lot of ear-bashing, Jos could not stop Johann dropping out there and then, so we drove him to the Great Northern Hotel. He was going to amble back to Sydney as soon as he got sick of Townsville.

While Jos was taking Johann and his gear from the Toyota into the pub, Brian opened up to me a bit like some blokes do. I would have said he was behind Jos about a couple of hundred percent, although he did have a few hang-ups about the gold being free.

You wouldn't be surprised to hear that Jos looked a bit grim walking back across that little railway park to us in the Toyota. He sank further when I said as how Brian wasn't looking for charity, but "What else is there for him?" was as much as Jos would say.

The three of us finished up at Rowes Bay caravan park out near the airport. The two other blokes who had come up from

the South were there already, looking after Jos's gear. They had put up the tents and brewed some tea in a billy somehow or other in the rain, so the five of us squatted in one of the tents to drink it, Jos haunched on one of his great hob-nailed heels.

Ian was a nifty little bloke from Tassie but it hadn't taken him long to put on the northern style. We were half way through our tea before he looked calmly out the tent door and addressed the rain.

"Where's the other bloke?"

"Pulled out."

"Already?"

"Dropped him at a pub in town."

His mate was called Ewan and he was from Wellington. For some reason he did not seem to be able to pronounce i, the poor mug, but he knew his local geography. There must have been a dozen maps of North Queensland scattered round his tent.

"Thirteen hundred kilometres to the top, a third of 't good road, a third of 't crook road and the rest real rough track. A couple of dozen r'vers to ford. Wide, deep and fast in various combinations. Steep banks, soft bottoms and crocks. A week each way on the easy route with good gear in a dry Dry."

Jos was starting to buck up again: "Our equipment is good enough. The Toyota's well set up. Winch, heavy tow-gear, welding gear, water-proofing, fuel tanks. There's a workshop at Coen and there's still fuel at Musgrave. We can make it."

Not knowing much about it didn't stop Ian though.

"But this is December. The Wet is just starting. If that doesn't beat us the heat will."

"We can make it. I've done it before."

But Ian was a short-cut merchant if ever I saw one.

"There's a strip at Bamaga isn't there? It'd be a bit of a challenge to try it the hard way, but why not hire a plane? It would even be cheaper."

"I want you with me, all of you."

What do you got to do to get some pertinent information to sink into some blokes' skulls? Like that the bloke that knew about the gold in the first place and was decent enough to go out of his way to come south to tell us about it, just might

know something about how to get hold of it. But Ian mixed in a lot easier with ideas than with persons so he only saw about half the picture. Though what he did see was clear as anything to him.

“Why can’t we just meet at the site? You blokes can do it your way if you like, but I can’t drive a 4WD on a highway let alone across a flooded river. I’ve never dug out a bogged vehicle in my life. I’d slow you down wouldn’t I?”

“Yes and no.”

I couldn’t help putting in my two bob’s worth: “Jos’s destination but without him.” But they wouldn’t listen to me much either, naturally, although Brian did say, “Or us.”

“Those charter companies. I could hire a plane here and flash up to Jackey Jackey couldn’t I?”

Jos’s eyes narrowed just a fraction.

“As long as the pilot watched the weather. Which he would. But you’re either with me or you’re not, Ian.”

“I believe you about the gold alright. I could wait here then fly up and meet you. I could even get a job here while I’m hanging around.”

“Bloody tunnel vision,” said Brian. But Ian was sticking to his guns.

“I think I’ll ring some of the local aviation blokes.” And we watched in silence as he struggled from the tent and across to the phone box.

When he came back Jos and I made our second trip to the Great Northern, this time with Ian and his gear.

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Next morning we broke camp for the first time. Jos insisted on taking food, bedding and tents for six even though only four of us were left.

“They might change their minds.”

He had been up before dawn. The three of us tried to help but we were pretty useless. It seemed right to just try and copy Jos’s calm persistence but the other two worked with a sort of manic eagerness, especially Ewan, and they were just as likely to do more harm than good, such as lashing down the gear on the

roof before it was all in place and spreading the waterproof before the lashing was finished.

“Well, I’m doing the best I can,” Ewan said more than once. “Nobody can do any better than that can they?”

The trip up the coast to Cairns was easy of course. Brian wanted to sit in the front beside Jos so that he could open the gates but there aren’t any gates south of Cairns. Anyhow it gave me a chance for a bit of a yarn with Ewan.

“The more you put ’nto th’s the more chance you’ve got of getting something out of ’t you know,” he said quietly to me as soon as we got going.

We went on a few miles past Cairns and camped at Ellis Beach.

Bugger me if Ewan the dill doesn’t disappear into Cairns in a taxi first thing next morning and come back at lunch-time with a beautiful big new Ford 4WD he’s bought complete with all the right gear. He even had a fellow to show him how to use it. This bloke had been to the Top dozens of times and knew what he was doing. Ewan was paying him a thousand a week for a fortnight on the tracks around Cairns just to prepare himself for the trip. (Ewan had clinched the deal: “What ever you th’nk’s a fair thing mate.”) Then Ewan was going to head north on his own.

“And I’m going up the coast.”

Well we all knew our mob was going to have enough trouble on the track up the centre but Ewan reckoned he actually had a chance up the east coast even on his own, and his new mate agreed. As usual Ewan was poking the end of a pencil at his map.

“I’m having a go this way: Mossman, Daintree, Bloomfield, Cooktown, Battle Camp, Lakefield, Musgrave and Morton. From there I head east and up the beach then in round the swamps.”

Jos admitted that it was not an impossible route. But he looked as sad as I’ve ever seen him.

“My kind of journey. But without me.”

It was too much for me.

“You’re a world champion mug. Don’t you understand

anything?"

"Look, I'm on your side, you know that Jos. And I'll be earning my way more than you two bludgers. And like Jos said, it's going to be h's kind of journey alright."

That trip was the crookest bloody fifteen weeks I've ever put in anywhere and we were lucky to survive. We had three weeks on the Jardine alone.

Jos kept on saying they might change their minds so we actually lugged all that extra gear all the way.

Towards the end Brian was twigging to a few facts, such as that Jos wanted our help but he did not depend on it. I suppose between us Brian and I might have shortened the trip by a day or two, but not the outcome, not at all. I did what I could for Jos because of who he was and I suppose because I was grateful to him. But I'd have needed a hundred lifetimes to earn that much gold so I was ninety-nine or so short.

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We got to the site on the fourth of March to find Ewan and Ian already there.

Ewan was camped in the back of his Ford. I don't know what looked the most knocked about, him or his transport.

Ian was looking pretty nifty. He ought to though, he'd spent the night before between the sheets in Cairns.

But they were both snakey.

"We knew you'd be here today," said Ewan.

"The three of you," said Ian.

"How come? Been watching from this side of the Jardine?"

"No. We've been having a scout around here. See for yourself."

Ian was pointing towards a cleared space and as we walked towards it we saw it was empty except for two great gold blocks in the middle, each one about as big as a kitchen table.

"There's one for you and one for Brian, and that's it, only two."

When I got to the first one I read the inscription:

Gift for (and my name followed)

Who journeyed here with Jos on the fourth day of March 1984

“Noah walked with God”

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MAUREEN KOZICKA

ANT HILLS

Petrifying
Sand castles
Peppering
A countryside
Deserted by
A million children
Long since
Piped
Away.