

HOT *type*

Koombana Days

Annie Boyd

(Fremantle Press, \$40)

In March 1912, after just three years of the North West service for which it was specifically designed, the luxury steamship Koombana was lost in a cyclone off Port Hedland.

Apart from some 10 pieces of wreckage, neither the ship nor its complement of 156 passengers and crew was seen again. As Boyd writes in the introduction to her melancholy history of the Koombana and the people whose fates were linked to it: "It is no exaggeration to declare that tragedy settled upon the Nor'-West like a change of season, and that Koombana's disappearance cut deep into the optimism of those formative years."

Over a period of 10 years, Boyd, a diver and historian who grew up in Perth and returned to WA in her 30s, amassed a great deal of information about the Koombana and the men, women and children lost with the ship. The result is not only an impressive and engagingly written history presented in an elegant hardback book but a free searchable online resource (koombanadays.com) where visitors can find "more than two thousand primary source documents".

Boyd admits that Koombana Days "is a different kind of history; indeed, not so much a history as an immersion ..." She also insists that no events have been embellished or dramatised. That the tale is still so vivid is due in a large part to her use of primary sources, including first-hand accounts by previous travellers aboard the Koombana who were visiting the North West for the first time.

Perhaps the most moving chapter, though, is that titled The Ill-fated Complement. Here, each member of the passengers and crew is honoured with a personal, if brief mention, such as this one: "At 27, younger sister (of 30-year-old Alice Beatrice Skamp) Genevieve had a little more time to ponder her future." » **William Yeoman**

