CHAPTER 9

THE PROUDEST PEOPLE ON EARTH

The Sandhills at Weir's Reserve, west of Narrandera. Photograph by Adrian Young, 1986.

Ossie Ingram of Narrandera, New South Wales, was born at Cowra in 1922. His family moved to Narrandera soon after his birth and lived at the Sandhills at Weir's Reserve. Here, Ossie talks to Peter Read about life at the Sandhills.

MY MOTHER'S GRANDFATHER was an Englishman. Apparently two brothers came out from England, and both got on to riding shotgun for the mail as security. One came down to do the run to Euabalong from Parkes, and from there he met my mother's grandmother. She was a Wiradjuri from that way. My mother's father was a Scotchman, Harry Corbett, a travelling salesman, who used to do the rounds from Condobolin to Hillston. He met my mother's mother back there and he got married and had three daughters in Euabalong. My mother was a great horseman and worked round there, but then she went with her aunt—her mother's sister, they were nearly the same age—to Cowra. That is where she met my father.

My father's father, Jack Ingram, whose own father was from England or something, came up from Barham to Warangesda about 1898 or 1899. He met Elizabeth Bamblett and got married. She was from the Murrumbidgee Wiradjuri, and had four sons and a daughter to Jack Ingram. When the boys were grown up,

they got to the age of fourteen the government came in and took them away and put them on to farms and stations and into boarding homes, to be more cultivated, see. My parents being so white they wouldn't allow them on the mission. My grandfather said 'We'll go across to Cowra. Cowra is an open mission and we'll go there'. There he learnt the boys to shear and that is where my father Jim met my mother. I was born there on 22 January 1922 and my father then came down to Narrandera. Got a shed here.

The Sandhills at Weir's Reserve, west of Narrandera. Ossie and his friends often played among the old middens, which still survive. Photograph by Adrian Young, 1986.

We lived at the Sandhills at Weir's Reserve, a few miles west of Narrandera. We got a little place and stopped. Because here was an open place, no matter what your colour was. If you were an Aborigine you were an Aborigine; if you wanted to be a white man they would help you look like a white man. This was the only place my father found where he was sort of protected from all them other things, like the board chasing him all the time, chasing his kids. All the family had the same ideas, that's why they lived here. And they caused no trouble to anybody. So they had no worries. You got a fair go here so we stopped and raised a family. My father had nine children—five boys and four girls.

I'm Wiradjuri—really from the Lachlan but from round here too. My parents spoke the language. Not frequently, only when they wanted to talk about themselves and we didn't want to know they would talk in Wiradjuri. I wish I had learnt it myself. Every young child wants to know his own language. But they were trying to bring up their children in a white man's world. One of the last things I said to my father was, 'I wish you'd have told me. You could have talked our language'. And he said, 'I never thought you were interested in it'. That's the trouble see. You had to show them that you were interested.

But I did learn some language from Granny Bright and old Mrs Westall from Grong Grong mission. I used to go down after school and see if they wanted anything to do; and then, when we were sitting down talking or having a cup of tea, I would get into the conversation with them and they would tell me the lingo. I'd just listen to them talk. They were beautiful. But not much, because they said to learn the language means going through all the rituals and everything else—you would have to know what you were talking about. Later, when I went to Euabalong, there was this old man, Billy Green, a full man, front tooth knocked out and everything. It took me a long time to get it out of him. But I went back later and stopped there four or five months, and did jobs for him or whatever. He told me then—to become a man the first stage of it was you had to go and be put through a *burbung* [initiation] so that you get circumcised. You got your Aboriginal mark put on you and learnt the ways of the world—what every man should know, what a woman was meant for, why man be man, and all that.

They teach you mental telepathy. There's a lot to it. You can kill a man and he might be a hundred mile away. Or be shoved off by a girl and yet call her to your camp at night by singing her. Also you learn how to travel from one place to another in the quickest possible time. Now you may think I'm telling you a fib, but the old people travelled in whirlwinds and rode on emus; I never heard of them saddling kangaroos, but most got on emus—those big fellers, extinct now. Most of the plains people travelled in a whirlwind—because you're free there to run as fast as the whirlwind, because there's no wind there, no—what do you call it?—gravity.

There's also the Uri men. They travel in threes, about a metre high, and though he's Aboriginal he's fair, he's got a broad nose, broad feet, a beard down to his waist and a lap-lap and waistcoat on. I've seen three of those over at Melrose reserve near Condobolin when I was about sixteen. I was just walking along and next moment I just stopped dead and I got that feeling that someone was looking at me and I

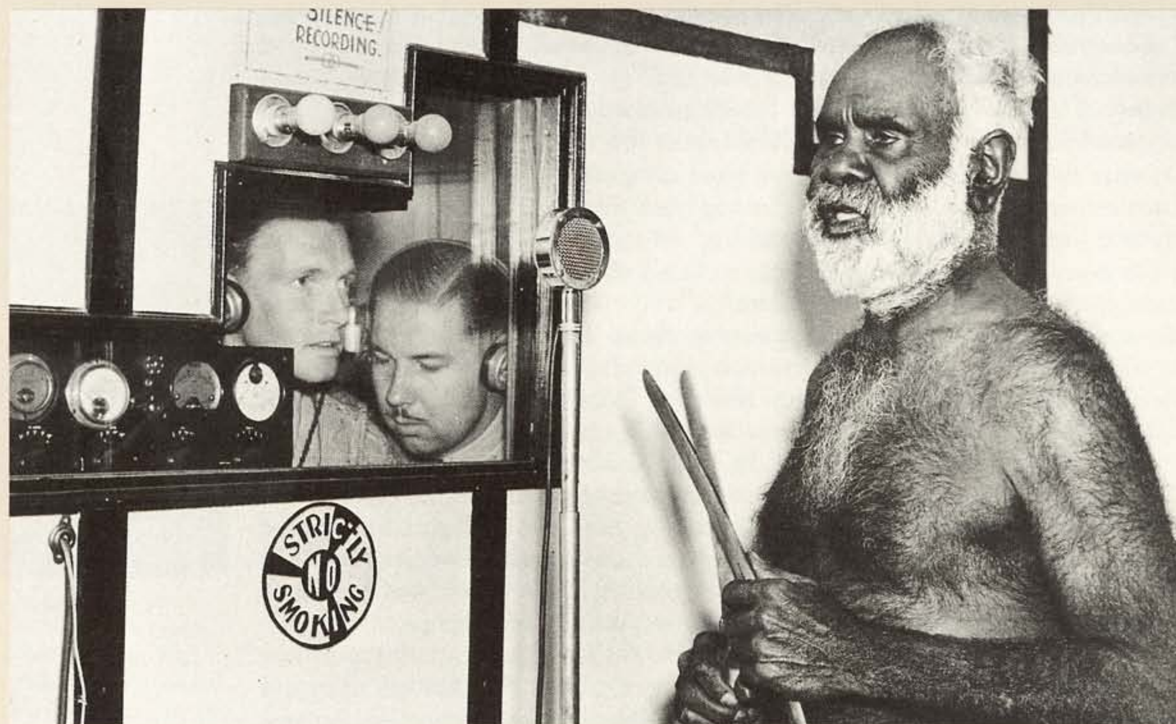
looked round and saw three little men. I walked up and said 'How are you?', and they said 'Ain't you afraid of us?' 'Why should I be?' I walked off and left them. 'See ya later on' and walked off and left them. Well I came back and told my father and an old chappy called Cecil Grant, and he said 'Yes Ossie, you'll be protected all your life'. Those Uri men got my future planned out for me. They are my protectors. Like me, they belong to the *jiri jiri* or the willy wagtail as you call it.

Another time over at Euabalong we were camped and I didn't know where I was going. I turned around and saw this big black dog. I suppose he'd be a metre, metre and a bit: big enormous dog, and big red eyes. I said, 'Here boy, I am lost, take me home'. He was running along in front of me and I'd keep up and he brought me within fifty yards of the camp, a little hut my father had built. I went inside and said, 'Mum, it was the funniest thing. I got lost in the bush out there'—some of those places out there you couldn't crack a whip through, mallee it was—'and there was this black dog'. She said, 'What kind of a black dog son?' 'Oh', I said, 'a big black dog about three foot high and he got red eyes'. 'Oh, my boy, don't ever go near that dog again', she said. 'That's a *mirriwa*.' I said, '*mirriwa* or not, he took me home'. He was once a man, a kind of cannibal which ate human flesh like a dog, so the wise men made him a dog. He looks after me. As a matter of fact he comes here at times when I'm depressed, and I walk outside and he'll just walk in front of me and say everything is going to be alright. Where he first picked me up is where my great-grandfather was buried I found out later.

Around here I see things too. In that waterhole we were looking at this morning, *Marngi*, there is a *wawi*, a river god or bunyip or whatever you like to call it, and he supplied fish, or whatever the Aborigines in the old days required for a meal. Only chosen people was allowed to go down to *Marngi* and fish. If you came from another place you had to be properly introduced to the *wawi*, tell him who you were, where you came from, what you were doing there, whether you were related or just a friend. Until you were recognised as one of the older people, say about fifteen or sixteen, you couldn't go down. Then one of your elders would introduce you and give you the ritual of the river. You learned what to say to the waterhole: tell him who you were, and ask him for the fish. You would do that in Wiradjuri, but I have to say some things to him in English. When you had enough fish the bubbles came up or a fish splashed or a wave appeared in front of you and that meant you were to go home. He's still at the channel bridge up there. That's the rainbow snake, a big long feller all the colours of the rainbow with a mane down his neck—same feller as the *wawi*.

There are a lot of signs that we believe in. There is the relayer of death, who generally comes at twelve o'clock at night or early in the morning. Then dreaming of a man of authority can also be good or bad news. It all depends—if he is solemn looking he has a message that somebody is coming, if he comes with a smile on his face and his teeth are showing well then he's coming to tell you of a death in the family.

I am of the earth [totem]. If a death occurs in my family, when I am sleeping then a stone will lie alongside of me. It happened first when my baby sister died, then when my mother died, then my father. A stone rolled on the roof of my house. When my brother George died a stone actually fell on the house. At those times—and it seems funny—I dreamt of the Lachlan and the muddy water. The muddy water is bad news and the Lachlan is something that belongs to me close. In all four cases the spirit of the person tried to get into my body and that is a frightening experience. You can feel the spirit on you and around you and you cannot do anything about it. I have a little prayer that my mother gave to me, a ritual really. You use it and immediately the spirit will leave you. It might be a



Milerum, a Tangane man, recording a song for the anthropologist Norman B. Tindale in Adelaide, January 1938. Milerum, called Clarence Long by Europeans, was born about 1869 and brought up by people living traditionally in the Salt Creek area, on the Coorong in southeast South Australia. From the late 1920s until his death in 1941 he gave much valuable information to South Australian Museum staff on the songs, legends, languages and practical knowledge and skills of the Aborigines who lived in the area between Mount Gambier and the coast south of Adelaide. In 1937 Tindale asked Milerum to sing into an 'electrical recording device' and between November 1937 and January 1938 Milerum recorded nineteen songs on six double-sided discs. Four were from European times; from traditional times fifteen concerned sickness and death, hunting, myths and totemic stories, magic, personal experiences and drama. The pictures were taken by a photographer from the Adelaide Advertiser *during the last recording session, and the paper published the picture on 7 January.*

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES

good spirit but then being a mortal you don't like to take your chances on things.

When you're born your grandfather or your father, he gives you a bird. Some are given a bird, some are given a fish. Generally, all the bird people can marry [each other], except the magpie. He stands alone, he's a 'clever man'. My name, Gungahlin, see, that's 'crane'. It comes from my mother's grandmother. So I have a totem of white flesh—can't eat a crane, can't eat a fowl. I like it, but every time I eat a mouthful of it—I don't know whether it is subconscious—it's like eating myself. Makes me sick. Yet I can eat a black duck, or wood duck, or geese. The Bambletts have possums, owls. Others mopoke, curlew. Could be more, I don't know. They've all got a funny way of giving a call that they're coming. Possum has got a different laugh, mopoke a different way of calling, curlew. Different ways to tell you what's going to happen. You know by the call. If it's a pleasant call somebody is coming. A death is a different call. They come up round your place till you take notice of them, talk to them and ask them.

I've got two birds like that. One little bird, *goodibung* we call him, he'll tell me when the fish are biting and that, and when anybody's coming—in fact, how many are coming. The other fellow, *jiri jiri*, willy wagtail, he'll tell me when I'm going to die, and who's going to die who belongs to me, and everything else, see. He talks to me because he was given to me by my great-great-grandmother. He and I are one. If anything happens to any one of my children he will fly about me and tell me which one of my children is sick and what has happened to them. This has happened to me three or four times. Every person of the Aboriginal culture has some bird or fish or frog or anything to come back to him. My mother, she has the black cockatoo. My brother George, who is dead, he has the magpie. My sister Irene has the little dog. Dorrie has the galah. They're all dead. The younger boys, I wouldn't know what they be, they don't seem to know what bird or animal they belong to. Yet we believe that every person in the Aboriginal culture is born with the land, from the land, by the land, and everything that is in it is governed by the land and its creator.

The people at the Sandhills were all family—all descended from Bambletts. People came in from Euabalong and Peak Hill and Dubbo and Yass but they mixed in with the Bambletts. It was a free community, no crime, like one big family. You had your own family, but it was like a family inside a family. Nobody did anything against anybody else. Say I went over to old Tiger Lyons' place and did something wrong, I'd get hit round the ears, quick and lively. 'Don't do that', he'd say. Well you didn't do that. And you could go and get a feed in any one of the houses. Stories, they told you stories about what happened and how it happened, and that's how you sort of learnt the legends. My mother's uncle, Andy, he'd come across and he was *the* storyteller. He could tell you stories and you wouldn't hear a pin drop, and you'd listen and you'd absorb everything. They talked mostly about the stars and the Dreamtime—what was in the stars and who were warriors, and about the three birds, the seven sisters, the golden boomerang, the drover's lament, all that. You've heard that one they call the drover's lament, about all the animals getting together and having a big corroboree. They tell you and point out the stars in the story. The stars tell you everything: what time of the year the emu lays, how many eggs are in the nest, when it is going to rain, when the seasons will change, and all that. You know the Saucepan? Well that is the warrior. I know his story.

At the Sandhills they made their own houses. They would go and buy bags off the flour millers, and buy a couple of bags of cement, sew the bags together and dip them in a tub with cement, and then tack them on the wall to dry. Made good solid houses, which kept the water out. Inside they used to line them with hessian, or if they couldn't buy hessian they'd get wheat bags. Then they'd paper them,

newspaper first then they'd put brown paper over. And they kept doing that till it got hard, like protective iron outside, with masonite inside! Then they went down to the Leeton cannery and got the pulp tins, opened them up the side, and just laid them on and painted them—it looked as if you had tiles on. The frame and roof was made out of timber from the Sandhills. They were very nice—the only thing, was, the wash-house was away from the house. Open fire. Inside the house was another open fire, plus stove. Most of the women went around and bought an old stove and built it up with mud; and went to a second-hand place and bought tables and everything else. Some had boards on the floor, and some clay. It was comfortable. Everything was alright.

The women used to do their washing down at the creek. Weekly, they all used to go down there, do all the washing and they'd hang it out on the suckers and on the two big fences. But your shirt and that for going to school they used to wash every morning, every night. They kept them clean with hot water and caustic soda. They never had much soap; they had blue powder, and they'd bleach them.

There'd be say four households all one family. One would buy 120 pounds of flour—a big bag. The next one would buy a big bag of sugar—100 pounds. You had to buy your own tea and your own baking powder, and then there's potatoes, see, and the menfolks, they furnished the meat. They used to go to a farm and do a bit of work with the farmer, and he'd give them a sheep or a side of beef or something like that. In those days everything was shared. Say my mother bought the flour, well, she'd give them so much each and make sure everyone had sufficient. People used to come now and then, going through, and stop for a week. The Sandhills people had their doors open all the time to anybody who came along, didn't matter who it was. We were all people together, no bad blood; sort of like living in paradise. The people never had a manager, did it all themselves. The only time you'd ever see the police was where someone got too drunk and wanted to beat up his wife; then they'd send for the policeman. And he'd come down and say, 'What's going on here?' 'Oh, he bust me up.' 'Well you must have deserved it.' And there was nothing more said much.

You respected police. That's authority, you'd say. Children wouldn't cheek them; and if the policeman come down on horseback, they'd see that his horse got water. There was no problem for them to come. I've seen the time that eight men sat down to two four-gallon buckets of wine, and drunk that all night, and not one word was spoken out of anger. Yet they were up next morning, all who were going shearing went shearing, and whoever was going to work went to work. And that's all about it. Their fathers, or their mothers, brought them up. Even us, if we swore we'd get a slap up the moosh quick and lively, but we never did them things. And people used to come down, swearing up along the lane there, and they'd come down, and they'd say 'Woop, we're getting into camp'. That's the way the people were, they respected other people. Could be because they were all family, not like on the missions.

See these people here be the proudest people on earth. They wouldn't go with an outsider unless he was approved by the older people first. Outsiders were allowed to come here, but they'd say to them, 'You going through?' to give them the hint to get going. If the old people approved, they'd say, 'Oh, he's alright, he'll stop here. Let him stop'. To make a decision, you've got to have somebody who's been through the mill. If they've seen all these things done, and seen how they work out, they're allowed to make decisions. One thing you never did, you never challenged an older man's authority. You were taught that from babyhood. You wouldn't go past an old fellow without saying 'G'day Uncle'. You might not have known him from a bar of soap—he was uncle because you were a minor. Old Jerry

Bamblett was the boss. He was law. He was law because he was the eldest of the lot. He was the family, see, because he was the first of all and whatever he said was law. Old ladies too. You walked up to an old lady, and you asked her, 'Do you want anything done, Granny?' Everybody called them 'granny' or 'aunty'. 'Do you want anything done, Aunty? Want some wood cut?' That's how young fellas worked. And at Christmas time the old girls used to cut them a little piece of pudding to taste. That was a reward for all the things they did through the year.

There's another thing about that too. You never heard of any people getting into trouble from the Sandhills, people stealing or anything like that. Oh, you'd find one or two, but not the majority. If you stole your father took you back to the place and whatever you had stolen you'd have to put back. The boss would then give you a hiding and when you'd get home the old fellas would say, 'Serve you right', and your father would give you a hiding too. Never steal, ask. If the man thinks you are right to get it he'll give it to you.

In them days the *gidgi* man, he was still active. Do you know about the *gidgi* man? Featherfoot. The bloke with the feathers on his boots. The black policeman or lawman or whatever you like to call him. He really becomes like a spirit. He'd come through, and if whoever he was after was there, you'd have to give him up. The first thing featherfoot would do, he'd go to the elders and ask the elders. If he come through the old fellas said, 'All right you kids come on in here, get to bed'. And it might be just dark, but the kids would all go to bed. You'd say, 'What's wrong mum?' 'The *gidgi*, the *gidgi*', and that's all she'd say. You knew, because it was drummed into you. I never actually heard anything talked about him; I didn't have the language. It was a secret. But see, someone might have done a job down in Victoria and be going back home to his own people. They'd send the *gidgi* man up to fetch that fella and he would take him back to where the crime was. That's the way it was.

We started school from here. After a while we used to pull in to Mrs Weir's on the way and milk the cows. They had a cream dairy just up the road. Old Bill Weir was sort of a big boss. You might say, once you hit Weir's place you were home, you were safe. He employed five or six of the men in his dairy. So we were learning. You learned everything that you could learn. He'd put a cow in the bail for you and say, 'Go on, milk it'. He might give you two for the week. You milked them two every morning and every evening. Then he'd put in three, or might be four. If you were with him twelve months you learned to milk the cows. He'd give you five bob a week, and you'd get your milk and cream every night. That was good money. It could buy two loaves of bread, half a pound of butter, two pounds of sugar, a shilling's worth of tea: nearly a whole day's cooking. A whitest of whitemen, he was. Everybody loved him, and everybody would do anything for him. We used to break horses in and things like that when we were young fellas, and it never cost him a thing. He had a lot of horses: show ponies, hunters, hacks and high jumpers. He had Musician, which set the world high jump record of seven foot ten at Wangaratta, and Dungog, which broke that record. He was a real old gentleman.

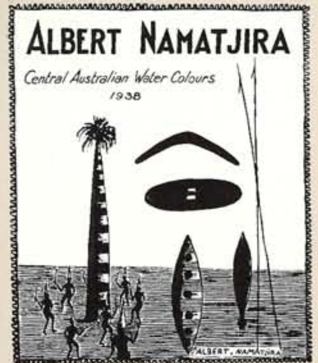
Our task was to go to work, go to school, milk your cow, get your milk, come home, and grab your dozen traps and go across the creek here and set them. And you'd take a line and do your fishing too, just on sundown. I had a little sugar bag, and whatever fish you got you put in that. Then you picked up your rabbits on the way back, might be three or four rabbits on good evenings. Then you'd get up before the sun, go round your traps and back, and have breakfast before daybreak. Then skin your rabbits, and if you had enough take them to school, then sell your fish, sell your rabbits, then walk home, doing your milking on the way.

Whatever money you got was given to the house. Always put into the house. Everybody was a breadwinner. Times were hard. You had to make every penny you could make and spend it wisely. Women did washing and ironing, the men would go out and catch parrots. They'd buy two or three bamboo rods fifteen or twenty feet long, and tie them together into a long pole. I used to see Billy Lyons getting four together. Then they would pull a few strands out of a horse's tail, plait them, tie a loop, a slip knot, on the end of the pole, then place it over the bird's head and pull him down. Someone was ready to get him underneath. Simple. They'd go out when the season came along, and first of all go for the small parrots. They'd get lots of them—green necks, cockatoo parrots, not so many blue bonnets, but rosellas and galahs. Then they'd keep them till the white cockatoos come along, and they'd go and get forty or fifty cockatoos. Well, they jump in the wagon one day and go up to Brungle [reserve, near Tumut]. Dad would take all his birds up there, and meet Tommy Johnson, his brother-in-law's cousin. Tommy was on birds too—the mountain birds. They'd sell them together. You'd get a pound for a cockatoo, five bob for a galah, five bob for green necks, five bob for a cockatoo parrot, ten bob for a ring neck and ten bob for a rosella. Good money, and never wasted. That was going on around Christmas time, and you bought your Christmas dinner and Christmas supplies out of it, and what you had over you just split up among the rest of them.

One summer Mum got sick and wanted to go home and see the old people before they passed on, so the old fella said, 'Well alright, we'll go'. So we got a good rig together and a few bob, and away we went. We left here in the hard time, coming on summer, and got over to Euabalong. We must have been over there a couple of years or more. When we got back there was nobody at the Sandhills. Old Billy Weir was dead. The old man moved first, that's Jerry Bamblett. When the old man moves, everybody moves. A lot moved up to the hill near town, and they've done well there. The simple reason was we were progressing in our own way. We weren't forced. And the white people here gave us a chance. There was no mission here, so we were like free men—free—as good as the next man.

Mount Sonder: *1938 watercolour painting exhibited by Namatjira at his first exhibition.*
DUGUID COLLECTION

Ceremony of the Sacred Pole. Photograph by Frank Hurley, 1936 or 1938.
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES



Cover by Albert Namatjira for the catalogue of his first exhibition, held at the Fine Art Society Gallery in Melbourne from 5 to 19 December 1938. It depicts the Sacred Pole, the centre of a ceremony practised by the Arunta people.
LUTHERAN ARCHIVES ADELAIDE

Russell Drysdale, born in Sussex in 1912 into a family with Australian associations, came with his family to settle in Australia in 1923. He attended Geelong Grammar School and then spent a couple of years managing his parents' pastoral property in the Riverina. In 1935 he married Elizabeth Stephen, like him of Scottish descent, and with the support of his parents decided to become a painter. He enrolled in George Bell's art school in Melbourne where the most discussed artists of the time included Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse and Picasso. The rabbiter and his family, *1938, shows his interest in portraying expressive figures in a landscape. Oil on canvas.*

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL GALLERY

III
CRADLE TO GRAVE

Design No 86, 1426 square feet. 'The verandahs are entirely for the family, which is a feature becoming more popular year by year; all rooms may be entered without passing through another room; kitchen may be made larger with steps at rear of verandah.' "99" Everyday homes for Queenslanders, *Brisbane 1938.*