

CHAPTER 6

# THE DISCRIMINATION WAS SO THICK



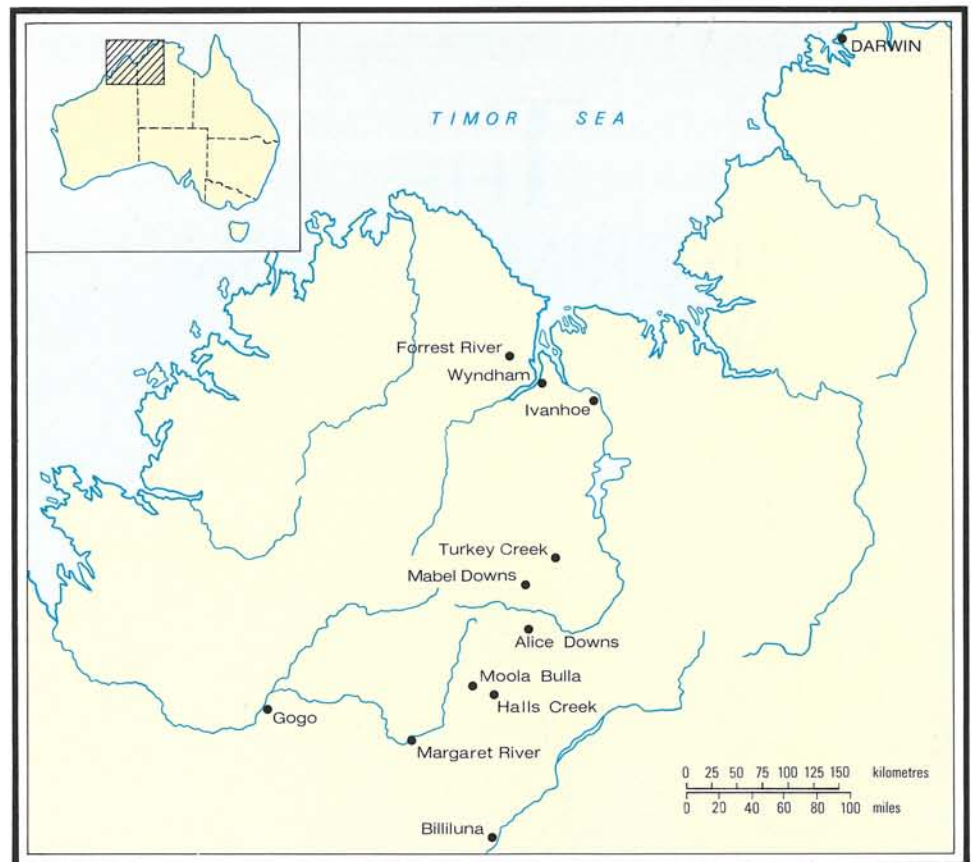
*Alfie Gerrard was born in Wyndham, Western Australia, about 15 July 1929 and in 1937 was taken away to Moola Bulla settlement. Here, Alfie talks to Bruce Shaw about the settlement.*

**W**E WERE TAKEN AWAY to Moola Bulla settlement. That's a government settlement just out of Hall's Creek, Moola Bulla. They picked up all the half-caste kids from all over the east Kimberley area and the west Kimberley area and put them all in that settlement. The truth is there must have been about five hundred kiddies, half-caste boys and females. They were picked up from all the cattle stations around this area, and even the towns, any half-caste kids. They didn't care much for the full blood, only for the half breed. Anyone that had a bit of colour was put in there.

At that time they had a bit of a school going there, although they made sure we got very little schooling. The teacher was Mr Hoveden. He was from Perth, and his wife and two kids, and he had a couple of other teachers under him. It was a beautiful school and they had a religious side. We had a bit of Christianity there for two years when Hoveden was there. He did fill us with the touch of the Holy Spirit. It was Methodist Church, and was very good. We enjoyed it.

*Aboriginal camp at Holroyd River, south of Aunukun, 1932.*

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N. DUFFEY, ANU

Monday to Friday were school days, and we were taken out on the weekend. They sent us down from a different direction from where the girls were going. The girls would go, say, south on the rivers and we'd go north. The next weekend they'd probably go north and we'd go south. They never sent us together because there were a lot of big girls, and big boys too, and they didn't want any trouble.

And we had to be Christianed. All new boys that came in were flogged on the Saturday morning. Dick my brother and I, we got the biggest bloody hiding that morning. I don't know why. Don't ask me why it happened, what it was all about, but they had to Christian the boys by giving them a good flogging. And so we copped it that morning and we were very sore on Sunday. We had to lay up then. We were flogged with a blooming stick, and then we were whipped with a whippy one that really hurt. And then we became brothers. Every time the new boys came in they'd always cop that. I saw dozens of them. I saw a mob of boys getting a bloody- well hiding when there were 150 of them there. It was probably the same with the girls. We didn't know, but they probably had the same religious way of Christianing the blooming newcomers.

The boss of the place was old Jack Woodland. He was the manager of Moola Bulla and he was a very good manager. They had sisters as well as teachers. Then when we got to know the place we had foster-parents there. They were Gracie and Eddie Fincher. Fincher was the old horsebreaker from Moola Bulla. That old man used to love riding and breaking in horses. We used to go there and help on a Saturday. We used to run down the yard and help Fincher with the horses, maybe hand the bridle over, or a piece of rope or something like that. We'd help along, shut the gate and open the gate when horses he wanted were coming through. We



couldn't ride them. We didn't know anything about it. We'd get killed. But he was very good. He used to show us all about how to break a horse in.

Yes, the Moola Bulla stockyard was very very big, with all the horses they used to run in. There were two working plants of horses for the stock—together about three or four hundred head of horses. The fellers working in this camp were about fifty stockmen. Jimmy Bell was the head stockman of one plant, and King Gordon of the other.

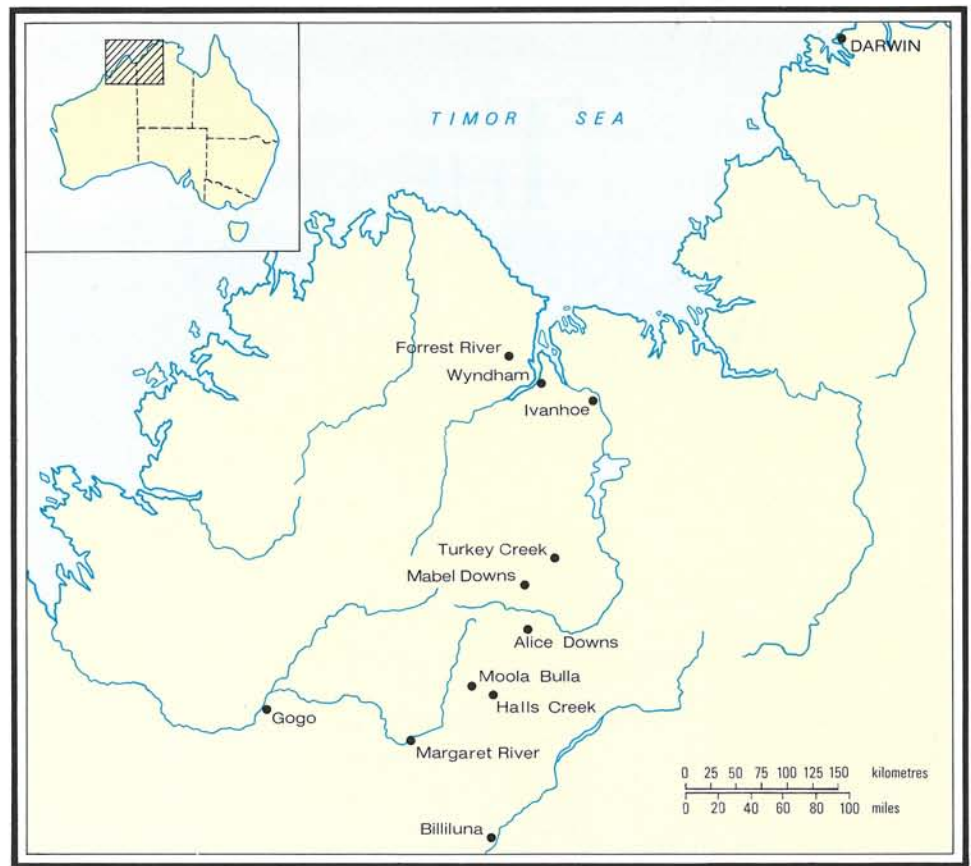
We didn't have money. My people used to work just for their food: bread and meat and tea. No money was given to the Aboriginal race, nothing. Everything was all built up for the white community, for the bosses—because they were the bosses I say. The Aboriginal people only were slaves. We copped it all. We never saw biscuits, ice cream, lollies and things like that, nothing.

In the cold weather we had nothing. We didn't get rugged up you know, and it gets very cold up in this part of the country during the winter. The winter wind was a lazy wind, it didn't go around, it went straight through you. We used to stand up behind the iron in the morning, up against the building where you can get the heat—when the sun shines on that iron and the heat can come back to you. We kept ourselves warm like that the first thing in the morning.

Those years were very cold years because we had nothing in woollen. We had no jumpers. They had plenty of sheep there on Moola Bulla. We used to shear the sheep too, muster them and bring them up for shearing. The shearers sort of stacked the bales of wool from the press and they were trucked away and shipped on the state ships for Fremantle and Perth. We were out mustering those sheep on foot and we did a lot of work on them. We didn't mind. We used to love it. But in the cold weather we used those big bales for blankets. We used to make mattresses out of them, or made grass mattresses and used the bales to wrap round ourselves to keep warm.



*Children at Beagle Bay mission in the north of Western Australia, 1938. The photographer wrote: 'Everybody works at the Beagle Bay mission station'.*  
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Sometimes we used to go to school with a pair of old shorts on, whatever shorts we had, and no shirt, sometimes running to keep warm. It was very cold. Sometimes we used to wrap ourselves up in these bags cut up like a shirt, you know, and just sewn up, and go down to school in that to keep ourselves warm. We couldn't take a blanket down. We got a flogging if we took a blanket. Our blankets had to stay back at the dormitory, maybe one blanket to two boys.

Anyway '37 rolled along. It got around Christmas and there was a big sports day then. Everything was saved up for that day, such as lollies, biscuits, cool drinks. No beer, nothing. Nothing like spirits or anything. Might be a big cup of tea or a big cordial put in a big 44-gallon drum. We poured all the blooming bottles in there and filled it up with water and ice.

Only the winners got the prizes. We had to run like hell with the other boys to try and get a pan full of lollies or something. Run, jump, anything; high jump, hop, step and jump, leap frog. It was anything like that, in sack bags and all. And it was real good, everybody was happy. We were always looking forward to win a prize. We looked forward for that day. No other day was like Christmas Day. A lot of us used to miss out, but we used to go to our mate and say, 'Right, come on mate, you got all that stuff. You give a couple a lollies or something'. We found ourselves having a wonderful time then.

A lot of things happened in the Wet then. We used to watch all the floods race down, right through the Moola Bulla valley towards the homestead. I don't know where the fish used to come from but there were big perches used to come up. The big ones would go up to nearly ten inches and quite deep in size, and they were very tasty fish. The fish would stay in the big permanent waterholes and we used to go out there fishing. We'd get many fish and we enjoyed it, swimming in the red mud too.

We were very pleased in the wet season. They had a beautiful garden with beautiful greens, a great big area of about two and a half acres with just green vegetables growing. Everybody used to get in there and work. There were taps all around the place and a bore right in the middle of it. They used to grow carrots, tomatoes, cabbage, cucumber; there was rockmelon, there was watermelon and pumpkin, and there was no trouble. There seemed to be no grubs them days. And plenty of fruit. There were plenty of pawpaws growing, plenty of custard apples, and apples in the fruit line. There was enough to go right through the stock camp, enough to flow into the kitchens of Moola Bulla to feed every one of us, white and black.

We all got plenty of everything. There was plenty of milk there. They used to milk cows. They had about a hundred cows. Goats, there were maybe five or six hundred head, a thousand probably. Probably two thousand head of goats. And there was plenty of womanfolks who used to go out, take the pails down and fill them up with fresh milk. We used to have fresh milk at school all the time. They didn't separate it either, take the cream away. It was just strained and cleaned and warmed up. We had hot milk on winter mornings. That carried us through the day. Hot milk, we loved it. We used to look forward for that cup of milk every morning. And a couple of dry army biscuits. That's all we used to get, army biscuits.

We still went by the school rules with our meals. We had about quarter of a mile to go from the boys' dormitory down to the kitchen to get our food and sit under that tree with our food, and when it was finished we'd go back to the dormitory. In the food line the grown adults used to line up to a big table and form in a queue. Their feed was just a slice of bread and a slice of corned beef or fresh meat. They used to get their cut of fresh meat straight off the killer and cook it out, but corned beef was always cut in little small blocks and placed on the bread.





They used to come in the queue and just pick up their bread. The youngsters used to queue up and go on the other side of the table.

In the wet season they would come in from all over the stations. Moola Bulla station was the centre for all the stations around it. They used to come from Billiluna, Gogo, Margaret River, Mabel Downs, Alice Downs, you name it. And there were all different kinds of corroborees. Even from down here at Ivanhoe, they were out there. When the Aboriginal *Wangga* king used to come up they'd look forward for that.

Wherever they were camping there were big camps, about fifty or sixty people and kids, too. The people used to welcome us, and we had our own foster-parents. We used to go to them and sit there and drink their tea, and they were so happy to see us walking with them.

They used to bring young men to go into the Aboriginal laws and things, to circumcise these young boys. They'd dance right through the night and circumcise them just on dawn, at the rising of the sun the next morning. This was not only one or two. About sixty or eighty young boys used to come, because that was the place to circumcise during the wet season. Every morning, maybe for two months, there'd be one or two getting circumcised. *Winaurnu* was the Aboriginal name for the boy to be circumcised. He had to go through that ring place, obeying the law, and do what they had to do. They used to keep well away from their sisters, their mothers, their family for a week. The big dance used to go on for a week. We didn't have to go to doctors and all that. Without any medicine or anything the Aboriginal people did it, and they do it now. It's something, that *Winaurnu*. Aboriginal law was a good law in them days, very promising law. And they stood by it.

We used to go out and get among the old people and go down to the corroboree ground. Right through that area, you know, we used to play around with our people, and we went down to many corroborees. They used to have the *Wangga* and they used to have *Yurami*, *Balga* and *Djulurnu*. Many different corroborees we could go to. The *Yurami* was from Fitzroy way. Sometimes we weren't allowed to go near. We were locked in the dormitory.

And another big funny thing, we used to have boomerang racing down there on the plain. There with all the boomerangs on a big open flat they'd teach us how to throw them. They'd put a sack up filled with grass and throw boomerangs at it, or sometimes use a spear. But the Moola Bulla people, those tribal people over that way, were not spear fighters. They used to knuckle down with their *mida*—that's

*Women at Ivanhoe station, near Wyndham in the north of Western Australia, 1938. 'These natives semi-civilized', the photographer noted, 'are capable of doing domestic duties, looking after Station Stock, gardens etc'.*

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*Men cutting up kangaroo,  
c1938.*

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a big shield—and finish up with nulla nullas and things. There were a lot of boomerang fights.

They used to cut down big white gum trees, cut the bark out and go out there and have a fight with this bark. And, I tell you what, when they came we used to have fifty on the other side and fifty on this side and we had these barks coming at you. I was hit with one of them when I was there. I was yodelling and crying there too. Not only myself, a lot of boys were crying you know. You got fifty boomerangs there you can't duck them. A lot of the big blokes used to get behind the little ones there and they put us in their sights and we copped it. We couldn't fight the big ones from the other side because they were too big for us. But we used to have a good laugh afterwards you know. It was just sports.

We used to go out with our tribal people, too, hunting for kangaroos in the Moola Bulla hills. I was there with them, about a hundred Aboriginal hunters. They were the tribal elders. And maybe a hundred kids just followed on, learning from the eldest bloke how to use the spear and hunt for kangaroo. They had miles of kangaroos there. They had porcupine, goanna to eat, and snakes, either rock pythons or water snakes. They didn't bother about anything like the king brown or brown whip snakes or black whip snakes or poisonous snakes.

We had the happiest time in my childhood there. I tell you it was real good. A lot of things used to go on. They always had some dancing and some hunting. The women were dancing, the menfolks were dancing, the women were singing, the men were singing. The children were there, boys and girls. We all took part dancing and singing or hitting the sticks. The community on that place were very happy people. Always there was food coming in. Some would carry on the dancing because fathers and mothers and relations were meeting their boys from Moola Bulla. Out of their rations people had to save tobacco and sugar and things to give to the ones that was dancing and did all the work. That was sort of a payment, like. Then early in '38 the people went back to their stations, where they camped, the ones that worked the stations. And we boys got ready to go back to school in Moola Bulla.

Nineteen thirty-eight it was a very good year. Things went very fine there right through the season for us. We broke the school rules, so we were flogged about.



We had to obey by the teacher's rule. And we were separated. The boys were separated from the girls. And the priest sent up five young men—they were grown men—from Forrest River mission because they used to go out and play around with the single women, their girlfriends. They got caught and for punishment were sent to Moola Bulla for hard labour. They all came about late April, I think. And they just fitted in with the others, with their work at Moola Bulla.

These five men had a mob of friends there, a lot of single girls, big beautiful women walking round Moola Bulla station. They were locked up in the dormitory there, you know, so the men decided to make them their sweethearts.

That year 1938 old Jack Woodland went for his holiday, and also the schoolmaster Hoveden and the other two teachers. They all went back to Perth for their holidays. King Gordon was in charge of Moola Bulla then. He was the caretaker. There was also Jimmy Bell, the number two head stockman and our mechanic, Snowy Dodson. Then we had the storeman who looked after the books. He used to give everything out. And the cook. They were still left about. That was all the white people, the skeleton crew left in charge, all watching over us.

King Gordon and Jimmy Bell, they were very fond of girls. They had beautiful half-caste girls just walking around Moola Bulla, and their eyes were set on it. And these boys had five of those girls for their sweethearts. They didn't like that, King Gordon and Jimmy Bell. They got a whisper some way that these boys was going around and meeting up with these girls over the weekend and a lot of love was going on, and they didn't like it. They were jealous.

The discrimination was so thick that the white people could do anything to any Aboriginal person, or anyone of Aboriginal descent. 'Cos I'm a white man.' Or, 'My skin is white. You black man you do as I tell you, or I'll shoot you'. This is sort of the language we used to get. 'Kids, we'll chop your bloody head off if you don't do what we tell you.' And we used to get flogged, too, with a great big lump of stick or anything.

Anyway they found out that these five boys was going away with these girls and meeting them on the weekends, so they decided to punish them. And the punishment they got was to be put on the chain. They were tied up in the sun on chains about twelve feet long, donkey chains with padlocks round their necks. They were chained to one tree with a four-gallon drum bucket to toilet in. And they had just one slice of bread a day, and water. That was their punishment. That was a very deep, big way of punishment. These boys, these friends, were tied up to that tree for a week.

In that week they were tied up, Jimmy Bell and King Gordon, the bosses, told the mechanic, Snowy Dodson, and his offsider, to set up a crush that you could put a man in. It was like an electric chair, where you could sit him with his arms out, strapped down, and his legs. In the old tannery they had it all set up just to put these men in. They'd start the motor up and give them an electric shock. So much current was going through—the voltage going through the wiring would give men a horrible shock. Like you had very good hearts. No complaints about their heart them days. But these people screamed and yelled and they couldn't jump because they were strapped down and the electric shock hit them. And they copped it. They were all sitting down there. You could see that the screaming and yelling didn't stop because the current was so hard. And it happened to all of them, and they all screamed.

When they came to after that treatment they were still in agony and pain. They were brought out. The girl one of the men was fond of also was very fond of Jimmy Bell. Jimmy Bell didn't like that so he pulled out his pocket knife. The man was just laying down, and Jimmy Bell pulled his knife out, put it under the man's



testicles and took the skin off the bottom. So, he didn't lose it, but he was cut. And when he woke up there was blood everywhere and he thought he was castrated. He felt the nuts was still there so he grabbed hold of it. When he got to it, then the biggest scream came. He screamed and screamed with the pain. And the others seen that. 'Well what you gonna say now?' Everyone of them was crying. And they were walked back to a little sort of room that locked, and the white men locked them in there for another week.

That was the very very heavy punishment them fellers got. Anyway, they were given back their clothes, their shirt and trousers, and they were flogged too. Everyday they were flogged. You wouldn't believe the discrimination was so thick—what the white people did to the black people. Rape of the young girls was nothing there you know. White men could do anything, have intercourse with the biggest one in the family way and things like that. Of course nothing was said because they were white. Nothing was said for our Aboriginal people, the full blood and the half-caste girls.

Anyway Jimmy Bell had two big dogs with him. They were a cross between a blue heeler and a bull terrier and they were savage dogs. These mongrels used to sit around with Jimmy Bell. He used to watch us boys, and if anyone hung back a bit he'd put his dogs on. One day we were hanging back, about twelve of us, and big Alan Turner was further back, and Jimmy Bell put the dogs on him. We took off. We gave everything we had trying to get away from these two big dogs. But Alan couldn't and they copped him. Oh, they teared his blooming leg. The calf of his leg was torn to pieces down to his bone. Don't ask me how that boy got healed, but, Jesus, you could see the bone of his leg. That calf was torn right off. And they rushed Alan to the clinic, done him up, dressed him up a bit. Within a fortnight he was right again. Everything healed back nice. It just shows the miracle touch of the Lord eh? It was real good healing them days. It was only just a big joke on the white man's side. They didn't care about us boys.

Late in December, when the mob was coming off the cattle stations for holidays in Moola Bulla, there was a big dance going on there and some more young men was coming in to be circumcised. This afternoon we were down on one of the camps, the Goose Hill camp. About four o'clock in the afternoon I think, getting late, half past four. A big group of Aboriginal people was dancing and carrying on.

*Women preparing for a ceremony, c1938.*

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It was a beautiful sight with so many people walking there, carrying their spears and dancing and singing. Anyway, I seen these two *gadia* coming down. And I looked up, 'Oh this is Jim Bell and King Gordon and what they carrying?' King Gordon had two .22 revolvers strapped on and some spare bullets all round the belt. He was carrying two squirts and a .22 automatic rifle. The other bloke had a .303 and two squirts and bullets all around, Jimmy Bell. They walked down just because their dogs had been belted up by the Aboriginal dogs. They came down with their dogs and of course the other dogs saw them. All the other dogs took to them and they took off straight back to their house. It was all about their dogs.

And the Aboriginal police tracker of Old Hall's Creek, he saw this and they were carrying guns so he walked down to talk to them. He must have thought, 'Oh well, I'm a policeman. I'm a police tracker. Every right to see why they're coming down to the Aboriginal reserve, down here, a mile out of their boundary, and entering right into our camps. Well, I dono why they're down here carrying guns'.

He walked in there, and King Gordon put his hand out to might as well say, 'Stop. You stop there'. But he kept walking. He came in about five feet, or four feet from King Gordon, and King Gordon shot him in the heart. Knocked him cold and he went down dead. Well I was a hundred yards away and I could see it. King Gordon looked up the other way. Everybody dropped their spears and the dancers stopped and they all burst out crying and, ah, the noise. You should hear—the howling, the voice of people screaming and screaming and crying, no longer singing and dancing with their heart. They were so shocked, so shocked, screaming and crying. The sorrow that came.

People from everywhere came running. King Gordon and Jim Bell walked back about a hundred yards; well, stepped back with their guns ready. Not a spear was thrown at them, and they kept on going, those two white fellers, and they got away, back to their homestead. People from everywhere came and cried for that police tracker there. They threw a blanket on him, picked him up and rolled him in it and put him inside. Then one of the blokes went to the blacksmith's shop and got some tools, shovel and picks, and had it ready for first thing in the morning.

And two of the young blokes went back to Old Hall's Creek, and told the policeman what happened. But we never heard any more from the policeman. The policeman never came down to check, nothing. No-one ever came.

Next day they went round to their cemetery, the old graveyard down at Moola Bulla. Everyone dug his grave and they took him there next morning about nine o'clock and buried him. Then the people went back. They started sorting themselves out to go home. They went out in their small parties back to their cattle stations and within a week the whole place came to a standstill. No more music of singing, no more dancing, no more didgeridu. None of the law was taken up that year. The camps were so quiet. People were disgusted. The happiness wasn't there any more.

When he came back from his holiday they told Jack Woodland, but nothing happened, because he was a white man. If a black man shot a white man it would be a different story. They would have been hung. Oh yes, a white force would have come from everywhere to shoot that black man. Of course a white man can do it, see. The discrimination was so blooming thick you could almost cut it with a knife.

The Forrest River man who had been cut waited for his chance, for his holiday. So when his holiday came up he kept on walking. He was a very good writer. He could write a good letter and he drafted it out, and handed it in at Turkey Creek. His complaints about how the policeman was shot and where he was cut, and the skin taken away from his testicles. He pointed all that out. But it didn't register. Nothing was done. And he had a copy of that letter, too, and he took another one into Wyndham. Nothing.



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It was a beautiful sight with so many people walking there, carrying their spears and dancing and singing. Anyway, I seen these two *gadia* coming down. And I looked up, 'Oh this is Jim Bell and King Gordon and what they carrying?' King Gordon had two 22 revolvers strapped on and some spare bullets all round the belt. He was carrying two squirts and a .22 automatic rifle. The other bloke had a .303 and two squirts and bullets all around, Jimmy Bell. They walked down just because their dogs had been belted up by the Aboriginal dogs. They came down with their dogs and of course the other dogs saw them. All the other dogs took to them and they took off straight back to their house. It was all about their dogs.

And the Aboriginal police tracker of Old Hall's Creek, he saw this and they were carrying guns so he walked down to talk to them. He must have thought, 'Oh well, I'm a policeman. I'm a police tracker. Every right to see why they're coming down to the Aboriginal reserve, down here, a mile out of their boundary, and entering right into our camps. Well, I dono why they're down here carrying guns'.

He walked in there, and King Gordon put his hand out to might as well say, 'Stop. You stop there'. But he kept walking. He came in about five feet, or four feet from King Gordon, and King Gordon shot him in the heart. Knocked him cold and he went down dead. Well I was a hundred yards away and I could see it. King Gordon looked up the other way. Everybody dropped their spears and the dancers stopped and they all burst out crying and, ah, the noise. You should hear—the howling, the voice of people screaming and screaming and crying, no longer singing and dancing with their heart. They were so shocked, so shocked, screaming and crying. The sorrow that came.

People from everywhere came running. King Gordon and Jim Bell walked back about a hundred yards; well, stepped back with their guns ready. Not a spear was thrown at them, and they kept on going, those two white fellers, and they got away, back to their homestead. People from everywhere came and cried for that police tracker there. They threw a blanket on him, picked him up and rolled him in it and put him inside. Then one of the blokes went to the blacksmith's shop and got some tools, shovel and picks, and had it ready for first thing in the morning.

And two of the young blokes went back to Old Hall's Creek, and told the policeman what happened. But we never heard any more from the policeman. The policeman never came down to check, nothing. No-one ever came.

Next day they went round to their cemetery, the old graveyard down at Moola Bulla. Everyone dug his grave and they took him there next morning about nine o'clock and buried him. Then the people went back. They started sorting themselves out to go home. They went out in their small parties back to their cattle stations and within a week the whole place came to a standstill. No more music of singing, no more dancing, no more didgeridu. None of the law was taken up that year. The camps were so quiet. People were disgusted. The happiness wasn't there any more.

When he came back from his holiday they told Jack Woodland, but nothing happened, because he was a white man. If a black man shot a white man it would be a different story. They would have been hung. Oh yes, a white force would have come from everywhere to shoot that black man. Of course a white man can do it, see. The discrimination was so blooming thick you could almost cut it with a knife.

The Forrest River man who had been cut waited for his chance, for his holiday. So when his holiday came up he kept on walking. He was a very good writer. He could write a good letter and he drafted it out, and handed it in at Turkey Creek. His complaints about how the policeman was shot and where he was cut, and the skin taken away from his testicles. He pointed all that out. But it didn't register. Nothing was done. And he had a copy of that letter, too, and he took another one into Wyndham. Nothing.



## AURUKUN

*Mabel Pamulkan of Aurukun, North Queensland,  
had two children, Mildred and Harold, who attended school at Aurukun.  
Here, Mabel talks to Kath Hinchley about her children  
in their school days.*

WHEN MY CHILDREN Mildred and Harold were small, they used to go to school. They didn't wear their usual clothes, they wore pants with a name on them—their school clothes. First they used to stand to sing grace for their breakfast in front of the cookhouse. After that the cooks used to dish it out for them, and they used to sit and eat their breakfast before going to school. At midday they would leave school and collect wood for the cookhouse, wash their hands, have dinner, wash their plates and have a rest. Then they used to have a bath, put on their uniform, and when the bell went, run and stand in a line to go back to school.

They were such quiet children, they never used to tease the other children and never pinched or hit the other children at school. But one afternoon they went out to gather wood for the cookhouse, and when they got their supper Harold called out to Mildred, 'Come let us have a race to the house'. So they raced, but Mildred was older and she won, and that started a fight. Harold was on top of Mildred, so Daddy caught a strap and gave a little belting for Harold and he yelled out, 'Please puppa, please puppa'. After that they were always walking hand in hand as they go to school.

I used to take them out hunting every Saturday and we had a good time out in the bush. We used to go into the scrub and search around for big yams. Every Saturday we never could stay home. We went looking for the wild honey—we call it sugar-bag. All day, putting our hands up from the sun, we looked for bees going in and out. Duck, flying-fox—we used to cut the flying-fox wings off with a sharp mud shell that we got from the mangroves, make a big fire in an antbed, put the foxes in and cover them with tea-tree bark, and leave them to cook while we went to hunt for sugar-bag. And we went to dig arrowroot. It's not easy to make arrowroot. We had to scrape it and grind it up, get grass to strain it through, then strain it again with fresh water. We had to wait till the arrowroot settled, and when the water was clear, pour it out, scrape the arrowroot from the bark, and make it into a ball. As soon as it was ready, we threw it into the charcoal and turned it over, turned it over. That was the main tucker. We liked it, arrowroot. Often Mildred would stay back to look after the old people, getting firewood to make fire for them and that. But still she loved to go out.





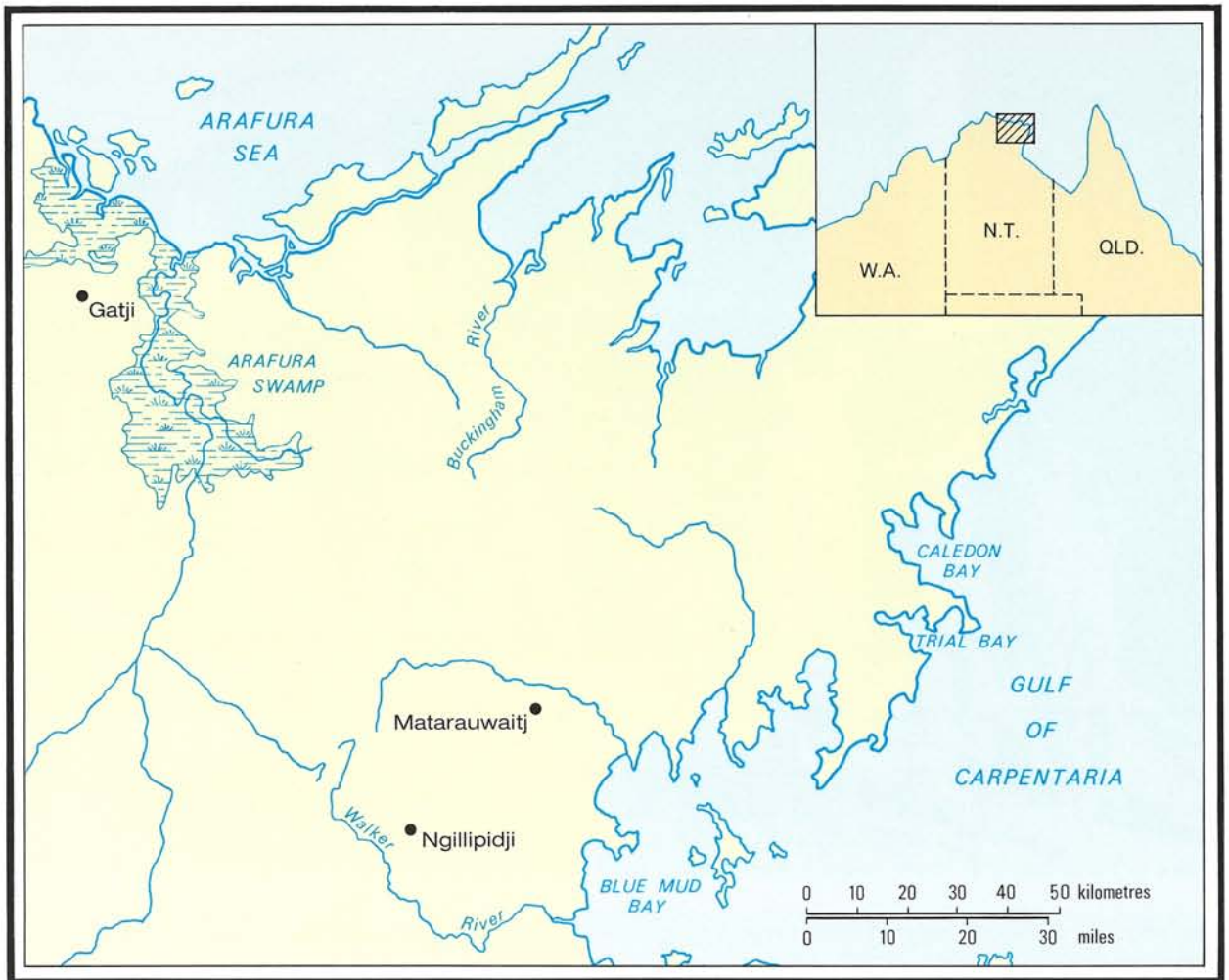
*Above and opposite.*  
*Children at Aurukun school,*  
*c1938.*

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*Four generations at Cape*  
*Keer-weer, south of Aurukun,*  
*c1938.*

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N. DUFFEY, ANU

## ARNHEM LAND

From June to December 1935 and from July 1936 to September 1937, Donald Thomson, a Melbourne anthropologist, lived among the Aborigines of northeast Arnhem Land. He went to learn why in 1933 the Caledon Bay people had killed five Japanese trepang (sea slug) fishermen and three Europeans, including a policeman. He left reluctantly, realising, as he put it, 'that I knew and loved the Arnhem Land people and that I had more in common with them than with my own kind'. In 1938 he presented a report to the commonwealth government recommending that the reserve in northeast Arnhem Land be set aside for the uninterrupted use of tribal Aborigines.

Thomson was a meticulous observer and a brilliant photographer. He took over three thousand photographs in Arnhem Land, developing them himself in the field. He saw the Arnhem Land people when many of them still resisted the missions and lived largely as their parents had. They received him hospitably and allowed him to record their lives in careful and sympathetic detail.





*Donald Thomson and three sons of Wonggo of Caledon Bay, Ngarkaiya, Natjialma and Mau. The three had taken part in the killing of five Japanese trepang fishermen in 1933, but in June 1936 were released into Thomson's care for return to their country.*

*Below.  
Wonggo and his son Garmali playing with the ever-present camp emu chicks. At the same time Wonggo is teaching his son. He is an important man in northeast Arnhem Land, and often Thomson's host and valued informant.*





*Above.*  
On the shores of Caledon Bay, September 1935. Yesterday there was a bunggul, a dance. Today, a master of ceremonies and clapping sticks; the skill will come later.

*Initiation. For boys it begins around the age of ten and involves a number of ceremonies over several years, some open to the whole community.*

*Right.*  
A scene from the karmak tapiwa ceremony of the Djapu people, in which two women, probably his mother and her sister, symbolically hide the initiate Dau'wurr'purr, son of Wonggo, from the men to whom he must be surrendered.







*A murrumbidgee string announcing his status as a messenger, an initiate sets out with his mother's brother to gather the people for his ceremony. Older people taught initiates songs, rituals and dances which incorporated law and tradition as well as moral values such as respect for age and property, truthfulness, the virtue of sharing, not swearing or complaining and, above all, the need to 'have a strong heart'. In eastern Arnhem Land the ceremonies included circumcision.*

*Below.*

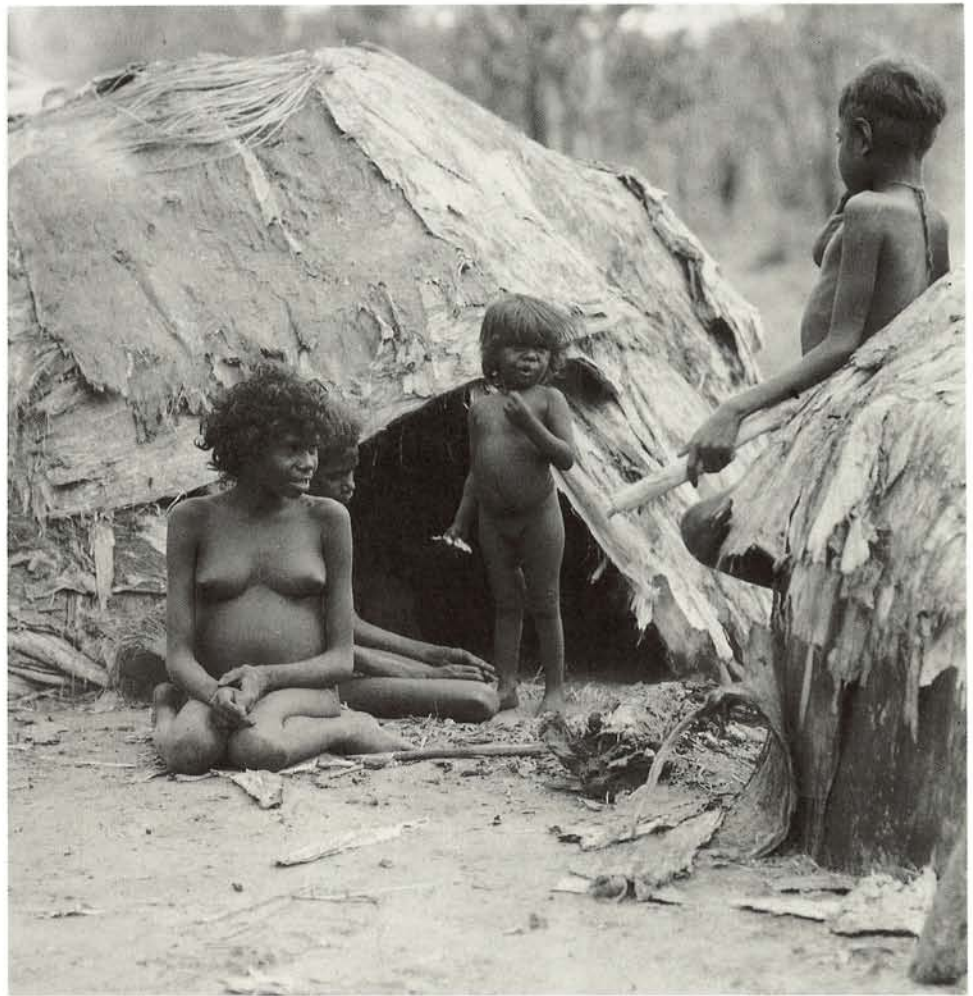
*In a mandilla ceremony women circle in ochre-striped skirts, singing and waving men's spears.*



For much of the year parents and children live as family groups, although from time to time small girls might stay in the camps of their future husbands. This is the wet season family camp of Rerr'ngundjin, of the Balmi people, near Derby Creek in January 1937.

Below.

The dry season camp of Merara, of the Dhayyi-speaking people of Blue Mud Bay, in June 1935. Thomson brought Merara news of the death of Takiara, charged with killing a policeman in 1933, who mysteriously disappeared from Darwin gaol just before he was to be released. In the evening Merara held a manytjarr ceremony for the spirit of Takiara. Merara was speared to death in a raid on his camp in June 1936.







*Shelter. People build houses according to the season. They might build nothing at all in the dry season, or a simple shelter of the kind photographed at Merara's camp, but increasingly elaborate houses are built in the Wet.*

*Left.*

*A sleeping platform to be used in March, when the Wet ends.*

*Below.*

*In January 1937 the house at Gatji, on the north coast, is fully enclosed as protection from mosquitoes. Inside a fire is kept going to smoke the mosquitoes out and at night the doorway is closed with bark.*





Food gathering. Although European flour is popular, most food is from the bush. Above left, at Matarauwaitj in October 1935, women gather the rhizomes of tall spike nush, *Eliocharis dulcis*, a dry season staple. Above right, in June 1937, a Balmi woman prepares cakes of waterlily seeds, good carrying food when on the move. Below left, Wawit, of the Turilli group from Trial Bay, returns from the hunt. Right, Kikirri, of the Kanalbingo group, and Tjarri, of the Djinba people, collect goose eggs.



Cooking geese on a platform in the swamp. Separate platforms, makarnbi, are used for sleeping and for cooking, but a fire is lit on each as some protection against mosquitoes. After a few nights the mosquitoes will drive the hunters back to their camps on the edge of the swamp.







*Djinba and Kanalbingo men pole through the margin of the Arafura swamp in April 1937, hunting magpie geese. Each man has made his own light canoe, nardan, which lasts for only one or two trips into the swamp.*



*Crossing an estuary. With spears and a bathi containing firesticks held clear of the water, men on their balsa-like logs of 'float wood', *Campostemon schultzia*, keep close together and make as much noise as they can to frighten away crocodiles.*

*Below.*

*The girl is too young to swim the estuary, so the women have made a paperbark raft secured with sticks to ferry her across.*





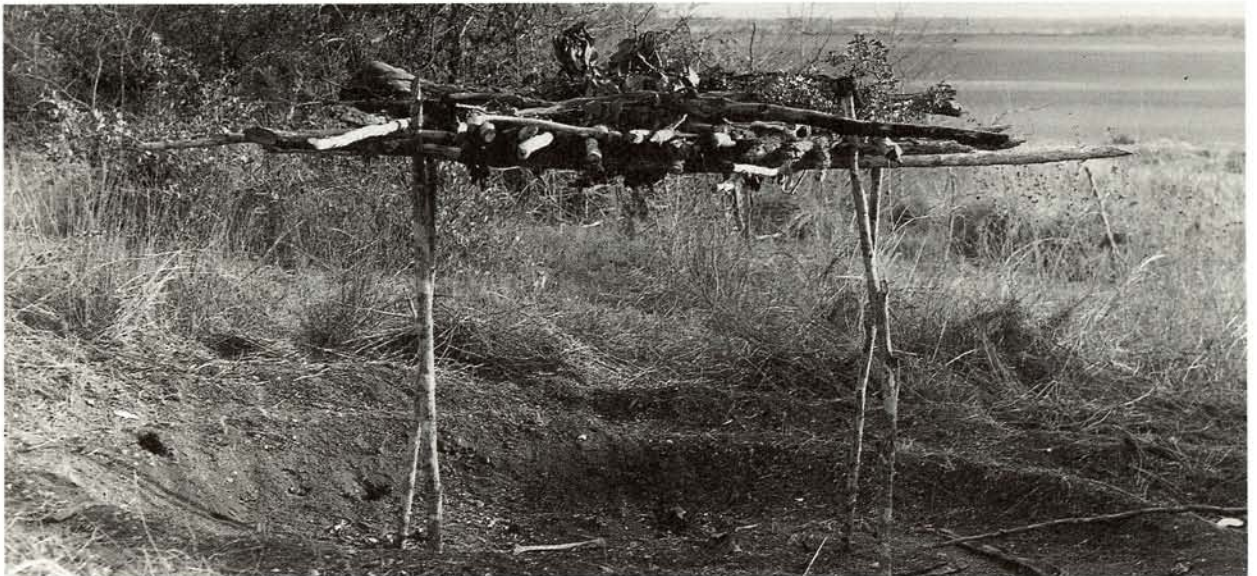


*Toolmaking. People often trade or salvage metal for knives or spear blades, but stone is also commonly worked. The main quarry is at Ngillipidji, on the upper Walker River. Here Tutjero, of the Ritharrngu people, works stone at Ngillipidji in October 1935. The blades he has made will be wrapped carefully in paperbark and traded far and wide.*



*Ceremony. Arnhem Land people hold ceremonies, both public and private, to mark stages in life or simply to celebrate. A ceremony may take months to prepare, and the objects for it may demand much time and skill in their making. Left, Minyipirri'woi, of the Djerranggoi'koi people on the Buckingham River, carrying a stingray spine spear, stands in ceremonial dress. Below is a non-sacred item used in dances and a marradjiri, a feathered string of the Turilli people, used by messengers calling people to a funeral.*





*Death. Arnhem Land funerals are sad rituals of farewell conducted over many years. The body is painted in clan patterns and either buried or exposed on a platform. Later the bones will be gathered, wrapped in bark and carried from camp to camp by a relative until finally they are placed with much ceremony in a dhupun, a log coffin, which is then raised in a prepared place on a ceremonial ground, as shown above. All burial places are spiritually dangerous. Right, Wunuvul, of the Ritharrngu people of Blue Mud Bay, vulnerable to the supernatural forces because he is 'too fat', is being bitten on his knee and elbow joints to protect him before he approaches a burial platform.*





## FUTURE OF ABORIGINES

After a sojourn of more than five years among the aborigines of the Northern Territory Dr. Donald Thomson has come to the conclusion that only by segregation can the remnants of this anachronistic race be saved ... [He recommends] that those Northern Territory blacks not yet 'detribalised' shall have the Arnhem Land reserve set aside for them and maintained strictly for their use ... It may or may not be 'practical politics' to maintain the whole of this large area as a reserve—or, indeed, to place the reserve there at all. In view of the needs of national defence it might not be deemed expedient to withdraw from white men's use altogether a broad expanse of coastal country at or adjacent to 'Australia's back door' ... [But] Culturally and ethnologically the two races have nothing in common. Ten thousand years of civic and social evolution stand as an impassable barrier between them. The aborigines can only be regarded, even by their well-wishers, as a dying race, whose last years should be made as tolerable as possible by those to whom their welfare is a moral responsibility. The white rulers of Australia have done far less than their duty by those they have supplanted territorially ...

*Argus*, Melbourne, 13 June 1938.

*Yilkari, of the  
Liagallawumirri people on  
the Glyde River, sits grieving  
at having been away from his  
country too long.*





*'Intent on the lesson that the teacher is illustrating on the blackboard before them, these little girls at Mount Margaret are typical of hundreds who pass through the mission schools . . . Their teachers say they are intelligent and anxious to learn . ' Pix, 18 June 1938.*