

A Brief Synopsis of the book, “Bunji” by Bill Day.

In 1969, the Age of Aquarius seemed distant to a twenty-eight-year-old ex-school teacher working as a labourer for the Nedlands City Council in suburban Perth, Western Australia. In those days, it was said that aircraft passengers were told, “Welcome to Perth, set your watches back ten years.” Instead, restless and enticed by radio news reports of hippies living on Lameroo beach in the tropical northern capital of Darwin, Bill Day took a bus to Port Hedland where he had worked as a taxi driver a year earlier. From there he hitch-hiked up the unsealed North West Highway, heading for the Northern Territory border and on to Darwin.

Casual work was plentiful for the hippies on the beach, in a city supplying the huge mines across northern Australia. In the evenings, cashed up, the hippies spent their pay in riotous beer gardens beside Aborigines enjoying the freedoms of their newly-won citizenship rights. However, it wasn't long before the white socked bureaucrats moved to end the prolonged occupation of the inner-city beach at base of the jungle-clad cliffs.

Although Day organised protests against the eviction threats of the administrators, it was eventually the first October storms that cleared the beach. By then with a well-paid job in the Darwin wharf, Day stayed on in town for the rainy season where he was joined by Polly Wharekura, a Maori woman who had met Day in Perth. The couple's first child was born in December that year.



Working with veteran activists in the holds of coastal trader ships began a political transformation for a young man whose father was a conservative bank teller and great grandfather his home state's second Premier. Recognising the historical importance of the 1970 Gove land rights case being heard in the Darwin Supreme Court, Day began researching for an article on the local Larrakia tribe, then apparently close to extinction. At a Coconut Grove Aboriginal camp, Day met a Larrakia elder, Bobby Secretary, living in his self-built humpy behind the screen of the Darwin Drive-in cinema at Coconut Grove, a semi-rural northern suburb of the city.

After the Gove land claim was dismissed in May 1971, a coalition of town camps began a series of well-publicised protests for land rights, including the raising of their flag to claim Darwin on November 7, 1971. this group adopted the name, “Gwalwa Daraniki”, meaning “our land” in Larrakia. Their claim and activities were documented by Day in 64 editions of a newsletter called “Bunji” (friend) between 1971 and 1985.

Land rights was an election promise of the Whitlam government which came to power in December 1972.. To celebrate, Day organised a rock and roll dance in the old Darwin Town Hall to the music of an all-Aboriginal band, “The Reflections”. Later in 1973 the appointed Aboriginal Land Rights Commissioner, Mr Justice Woodward, visited Bobby Secretary and his followers at their camp known as Kulaluk. There the Commissioner could see the new subdivision “Alamanda Gardens” which triggered the land claim.



One month later, three Aboriginal men were charged when a surveyor's truck was firebombed and police and workers were attacked on the new subdivision through the Kulaluk claim. A Queensland Aborigine, Fred Forgarty, was released on bail until his trial in the Supreme Court, to be defended by Frank Galbally QC. Fogarty was sentence to six months jail but was released when Cyclone Tracy demolished the prison on Christmas Day, 1974.

A week before the cyclone, the Kulaluk claim of 301 hectares was approved by Cabinet in Canberra. Unfortunately this decision had not been announced and the claim was handed over to the Interim Land Commissioner to hear in May 1975. Judge Ward's favourable findings were in turn overlooked when the Whitlam government was dismissed on November 11 that year.

The promised Land Rights Act was passed by the Fraser government who left a final decision on the town claims to the NT government, due to be granted self-government in 1978. However, it wasn't until September 1979 that the title to Kulaluk was handed to Bobby Secretary, now referred to as "the traditional owner".

In the meantime, Fogarty and Day had constructed picturesque camps on the southern end of the Kulaluk lease. Despite their dreams for the future, they were kept busy opposing deals made by the new title holders, the Gwalwa Daraniki Association. As a result of his successfully blocking several schemes proposed by the Association and developers, Day received an eviction notice which he ignored. After a showdown before the courts in 1985, the matter was granted an indefinite adjournment.

Bobby secretary died in 1984, shortly after Darwin City Council dredging machines dug a network of drains across the Kulaluk wetlands. Fred Fogarty died mysteriously five months later. When Fogarty's buildings were demolished before his funeral, Day decided to leave Kulaluk in disgust.

On the streets of Sydney, in destitution reminiscent of 'the last of the Sydney clan', Day connected with his own inner suppressed feelings and learnt the secret of recovery from messages in the 64 editions of his newsletter Bunji. After years of therapy in New Zealand, reunited with Polly and their two children, Day was able to return to Perth. After two more years working as a security guard at the University of Western Australia he visited Darwin again where he met a young Aboriginal man he knew as a boy at Kulaluk. The book ends with an emotional reunion, symbolic of Day embracing his lost inner child.

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Post script: In 2001, in an impressive ceremony in Winthrop Hall, Day graduated from the University of Western Australia as Dr Day with a PhD in Anthropology.

In 2014 he was residing in Maylands, WA. Phone 08 93715010