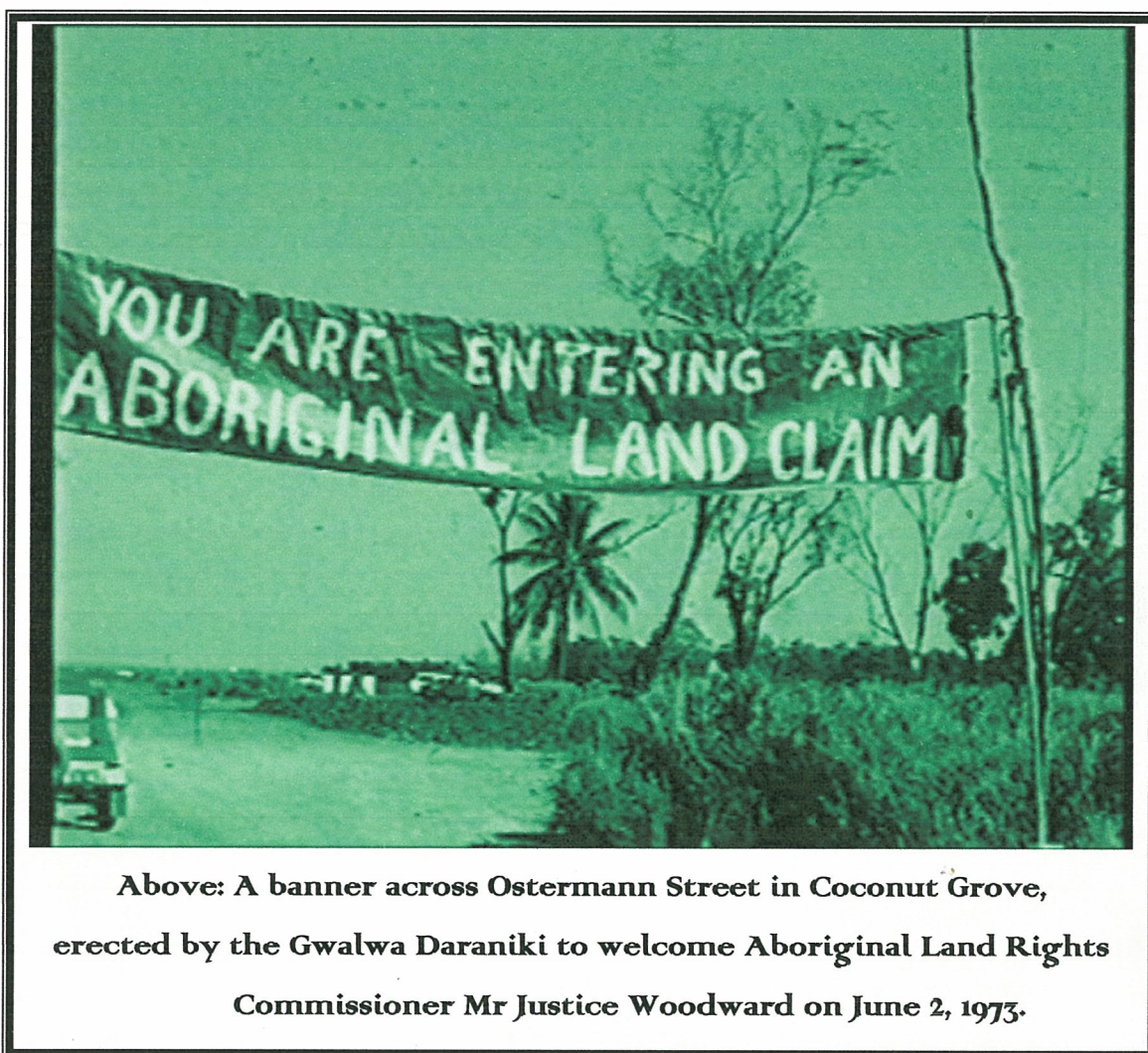


Town camp or homeland?

A history of the Kulaluk Aboriginal community.

Report to the Australian Heritage Commission.



Above: A banner across Ostermann Street in Coconut Grove, erected by the Gwalwa Daraniki to welcome Aboriginal Land Rights Commissioner Mr Justice Woodward on June 2, 1973.

Report by
SAMANTHA WELLS

Darwin

1995

Town Camp or Homeland?
A History of the Kulaluk Aboriginal Community

Report to the Australian Heritage Commission

Samantha J Wells

8 November 1995

1995c

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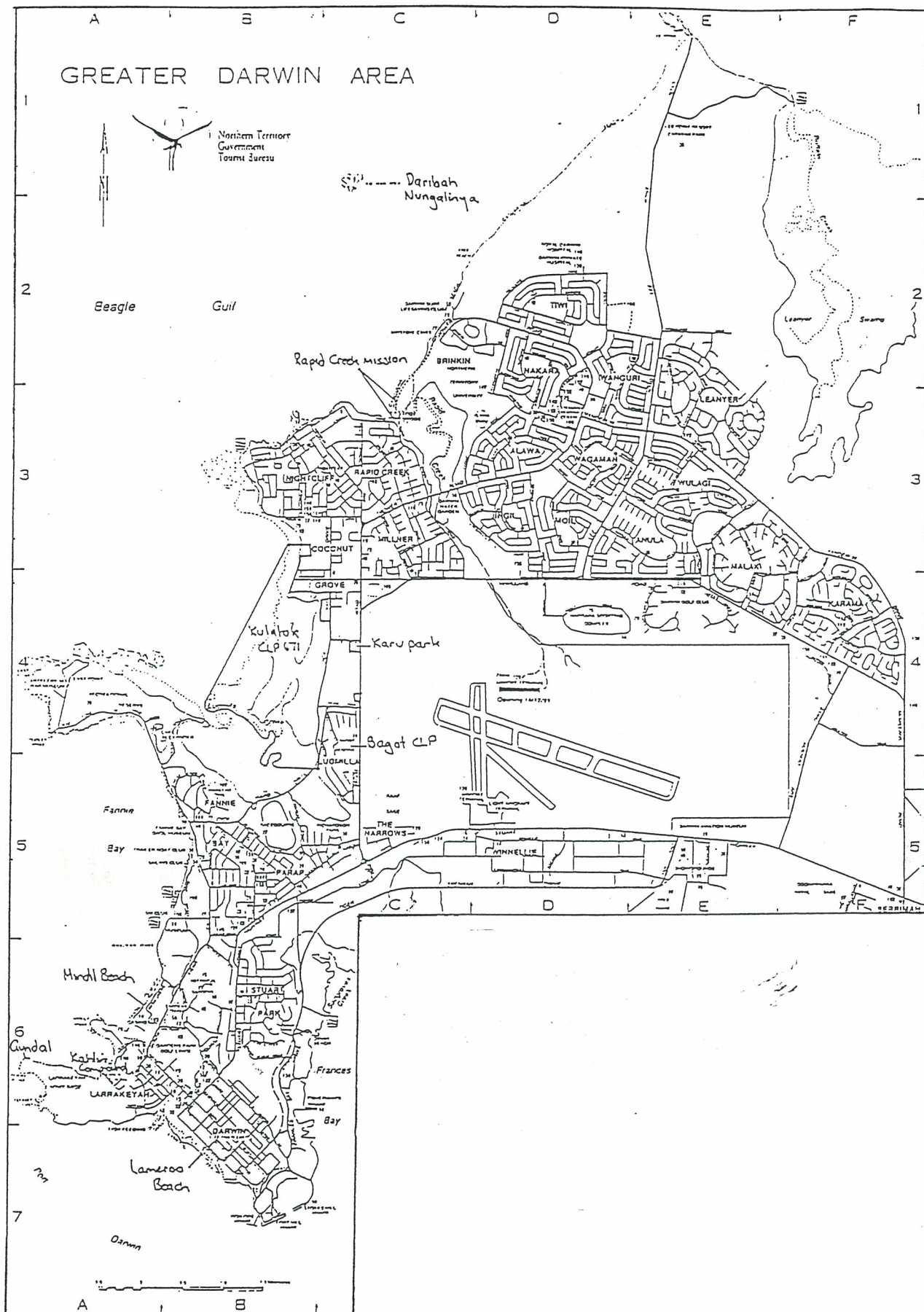
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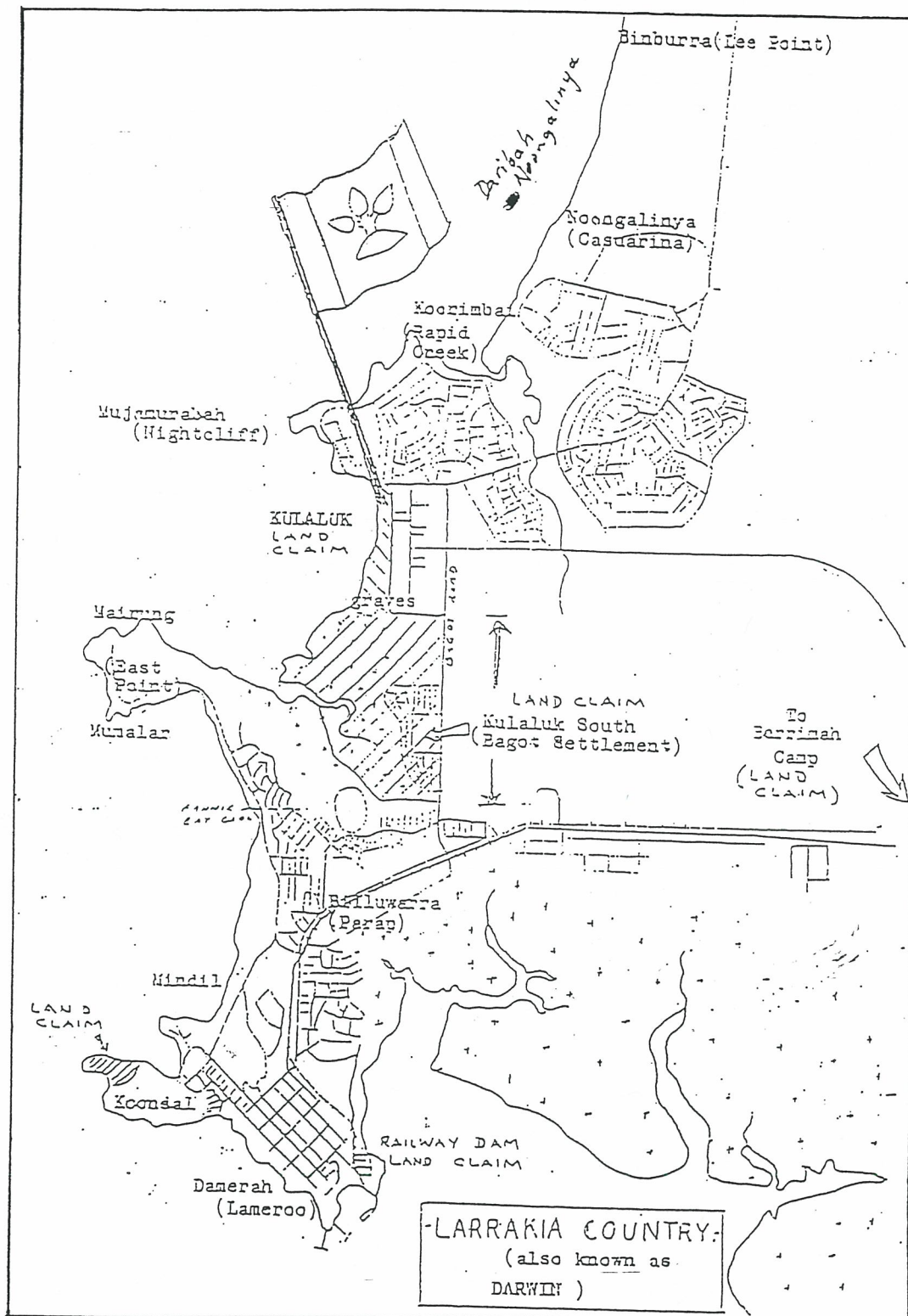
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Introduction

"During this International Year of Indigenous People, it is appropriate that we give special recognition to the Northern Territory's original inhabitants ... Today, many of the Larrakia people of Darwin are not so readily identifiable as their ancestors appearing in the photographs, some of which were taken a century ago ... But the Larrakia people can be found in all parts of the city and in all walks of life ... Larrakian ancestry is a proud ancestry, and the Larrakia people deserve recognition as the people who traditionally lived in the area ... One of our oldest suburbs is named after them. So too is the Larrakeyah Military Reserve and Larrakeyah Terrace. At Mindil Beach there is a monument marking the Larrakia burial-ground ... However, there are also suburbs, streets and other features in the Darwin area that are named after other Aboriginal people and, as a result, many residents, especially those who have lived here only a short time, may not be aware that the Larrakia were the traditional inhabitants ... I believe that more could be done and should be done to record the place of the Larrakia people in our city and our history ... In a city that prides itself on its multi-racial society, it is important that no group is elevated above another but that all are accorded due recognition ... I believe the Larrakia people deserve greater recognition than they have received in the past and the matter will be addressed" (Perron 1993).

In the 1993 speech cited above the former Northern Territory Chief Minister, Marshall Perron, refers to the naming of suburbs, streets and a military reserve, the erection of a monument 'marking the Larrakia burial ground' and a desire to 'renew land claim negotiations' as examples of the official recognition of Larrakia traditional ownership of the Darwin area. What Perron fails to mention is that the Larrakeyah¹ Military Reserve was situated on an important Larrakia ceremonial site; the erection of the monument marking the Larrakia burial site at Mindil Beach was the result of the exhumation of this site on four separate occasions amidst protests from various traditional owners and the Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Authority which led to a lengthy legal dispute over the identity of the skeletons; and a manoeuvre on behalf of the Northern Territory government to extend the Darwin town boundaries an impossible distance in order to thwart the proceedings of a land claim where the principal claimants were Larrakia. Contrary to Perron's platitudes, Larrakia traditional ownership of the Darwin area has not gone unchallenged and much time and energy has been expended in the fight for that recognition.

In 1971 the headline of a newspaper article asked 'Who are the Larrakias?' The author, Peter Spillelt, found that question difficult to answer on the basis that 'few of the people speak Larrakia [and] those who do, tell me that the word Larrakia is not part of their language [which] casts some doubt on their connection with the tribe which was here at the time of first settlement'. Because of 'intermarrying with other tribes [it was] ... hard

¹ Tindale (1974) records several different spellings of the term Larrakia such as Larrakia, Larrakiha, Larrakiya, Larreekeeyak, Larrekiya, Larrikia, Larrikiya, Larriquia. Today the favoured, as opposed to linguistically correct, spelling is Larrakia. Researchers have indicated that 'Larrakia' was a label given to Aborigines in the Darwin area by outsiders and Berndt gives Gunimilgin as the indigenous name for the Larrakia (Berndt 1947:50). Bill Day recorded from senior Larrakia, Bobby Secretary, in 1971 that they were the Gulamirikin people (pers. comm. Bill Day 1995). Tindale also records that the Larrakia separated themselves into coastal, inland and southern groups, Binnimiginda, Gunmajerrumba and Marri respectively (Tindale 1974:230). In this report 'Larrakia' is used to refer to Aboriginal people identifying as belonging to the language group Laragiya. The many variations of the spelling of the term 'Larrakia' which occur in this report are consistent with the way they appear in the original sources. Similarly, other Aboriginal words are either spelt according to the way they appear in original sources or follow the common spelling of the word rather than the linguistically correct spelling.

to tell whether any genuine Larrakias exist today' (*NT News*, 2 November 1971). Against the backdrop of an evolving local and national Aboriginal land rights movement the Larrakia launched their claim for recognition of traditional ownership of an area of land in Darwin called Kulaluk. Referring to this claim Spillett deduced that '[a]lthough it is part of the former territory of the Larrakia tribe I doubt if Kulaluk has any real religious or ceremonial significance to the people there. It is just a good spot to camp and the older ones do not want to move'. Spillett did not however 'see any reason why the people camped at Kulaluk should have to move until the time comes for the land to be developed' (*NT News*, 2 November 1971). Kim Lockwood, writing in the *West Australian*, declared that the 'Larrakias jumped on the bandwagon in the middle of last year ... The strikes and other protests - almost always over land claims - gradually increased to the point at which the Larrakias felt they were missing out' (*The West Australian*, 11 January 1972).

Two years after it had been predetermined that the Larrakia 'had lost their land forever' (*The West Australian*, 11 January 1972), the Larrakia and their supporters played a significant role in highlighting the case for the recognition of Aboriginal land rights in an urban area to the newly appointed Aboriginal Land Commissioner, Justice AE Woodward. After representations from the Larrakia and their supporters Woodward determined that the 'situation warranted special consideration' and visited Kulaluk to gain an understanding of the Larrakia claim and to consider how the impending Aboriginal land rights legislation would be determined in respect of urban land claims. As a result of his investigations in Darwin and at Kulaluk, Woodward recognised in his first report that the Larrakia were '[c]learly ... entitled to consideration as a group wanting to live as a small community and to do so on some part of the traditional lands of their tribe' (Woodward 1973:paragraph 157-159). Woodward, although recognising the necessity and right of the Larrakia to occupation of their traditional lands, felt that whether 'they should be free to choose the particular site in a developing city such as Darwin' raised some 'special problems'. Specifically these concerned the length and extent of Larrakia attachment to the area in question, the effect of town planning considerations and the possible effect of rights of other persons acquired in good faith (Woodward 1973:paragraph 157-159). The issues raised by Woodward are crucial to an understanding of the granting of the Kulaluk Special Purpose Lease which occurred in 1979 after a powerful cyclone ravaged Darwin; rapid changes in Federal government; the passage of an amended Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act; the granting of self government to the Northern Territory; and the development of Darwin into a 'modern' city. The long struggle to have the lease granted became part of a broader struggle to have ongoing Larrakia traditional ownership of the Darwin area recognised.

In popular histories and creative writings, in academic works, in private journals and diaries and in official correspondence written during the early decades of settlement the Larrakia were consistently acknowledged as the traditional owners of the Darwin region. Yet almost one hundred years after the colonisation of this area it was possible for the headline of a newspaper article to ask 'who' are the Larrakia rather than 'where' are they, what happened to them and how important is it to Darwin generally that the Larrakia were the traditional owners of this land? (see Rose and Lewis 1992). Throughout Darwin a plethora of brown and blue signs alert residents and tourists alike to the many WWII historic sites in the Darwin area. In 1994 preparations to mark the twentieth anniversary of Cyclone Tracy were enormous and many commemorative events occurred throughout the year. Why is it then, that in a city which obviously assigns importance to heritage sites and 'historic' events, a writer had to 'search' for the traditional owners, the Larrakia.

Until recently, historians and anthropologists were not concerned about documenting the impact of colonisation on the social and cultural organisation of Aborigines. As a consequence the 'destruction of Aboriginal society' became a dominant metaphor in describing the impact of colonisation on Aborigines as a 'one way process of collapse to which the appropriate response is passive sorrow' (Cowlshaw 1992:25). Popular historian, Ernestine Hill, writing of an early settlement incident which involved the reprimanding of some Aborigines for the spearing of a horse claims that:

the 'incident' ended when they tamed Maranda, a powerful old man, called him King Solomon, hung the royal tin plate of false pretences around his neck, and allowed him to beg with it for tucker and tobacco as long as he kept his people out of mischief ... Never in seventy years have the peaceful Larrakia committed a serious crime against the white people in Darwin. I doubt whether there is one true descendant of a virile and interesting tribe alive today. There were about a thousand in twenty square miles in 1870 (Hill 1951:99).

The historian Alan Powell synthesises the impact of colonisation on the Larrakia in one paragraph:

Perhaps the saddest fate of all befell a people who were consistently friendly to Europeans and never suffered massacre at their hands; the Larrakia of Darwin. When William Wildey visited Darwin in 1873 he spoke of their happy nature, their temperance - 'with exception of those who visited Adelaide they know not the taste of alcoholic liquor, and refuse to taste it' - the 'rigidly correct' behaviour of the Larrakia women who helped in the houses of the whites and the 'majestic' carriage of the young girls. Nine years later WJ Sowden saw them receiving the white man's largesse, 'flour ... doled out in a grocer's scoop in anything but grocer fashion ... ah, such degraded specimens of humanity ... 'Twas pitiful, though still amusing, to see these people as they came for flour - came with old tins, and bits of dirty paper, and rags, and leaves. In 1928 Baldwin Spencer wrote that 'it is now too late to study the Larrakia' so far had their traditional society broken down because they were too close to too many whites (Powell 1988:135).

In works such as these it becomes obvious that the Larrakia are deemed 'important not so much for what they have done but for what has been done to them' (Reece quoted in Attwood 1989:149). Such interpretations create and reinforce the provocative image of Aboriginal society irrevocably 'breaking down'; of Aboriginal people not having an input to or exercising some control over the colonising process; and denies Aboriginal people the ability to adapt and respond to such overwhelming changes in unique and distinct ways. As well as aiding non-Aboriginal Australians in either forgetting or not deeming worthy of remembering certain aspects of the past this perspective also makes it extremely difficult to see Aborigines in the present. Further study could show that post contact Aboriginal history in Darwin 'is not as it was once imagined to be, a bleak chronicle of decline and extinction ... it is a record of valiant struggle, transformations, and the continual reaffirmation of a will to survive in the face of indifference, hostility and paternalism from a seemingly ever more powerful adversary' (Trigger 1985:25).

More recently historical and anthropological works are emerging which challenge the previously accepted characterisation of Aborigines and recognise that urban Aboriginal groups have distinct and dynamic cultures - open to both change and constancy. Within the last few years of historical discourse Aboriginal historiography has also undergone some fundamental changes. One of the major changes being that Aborigines are reclaiming rights to the construction of their history by controlling access to resources about them, by recording and writing their own histories, by determining who will or

will not work with them and by making non-Aboriginal historians accountable to them by challenging their work in public and academic forums. In addition to this, the advent of 'public history' which recognises and celebrates 'multiple histories, multiple meanings, the multiple uses and interpretations of place which different people have brought to their shared lives in one place and time' (Rose and Lewis 1992:27) has significantly informed historiography. Public history considers that although the 'life experiences and historical consciousness of the two groups differ' there is a 'complexity and richness that evolves from a willingness to recognise the many stories contained in place and time' (Rose and Lewis 1992:36). Such forms of public history as oral and local histories bring to the surface this multi-layering of events and stories and time and have begun to focus on such notions as the place of memory in the construction of history and the way in which identities are constructed for or by a sense of 'place'. Examining the importance of memory and sense of place to the present, Fentress and Wickham claim that 'recalled past experience and shared images of the historical past are kinds of memories that have particular importance for the constitution of social groups in the present' (Fentress & Wickham 1992:xi).

The colonisation of Darwin did not signify the end of Aboriginal history for this area. Larrakia people and their descendants constitute a strong and active presence in Darwin today. As a claimant in the Kenbi Land Claim testified, the Larrakia:

are just as much every bit as Aboriginal as the people that it is convenient to regard as Aboriginal. We do not stand by wurlies in our nagas with a spear in one hand and a kangaroo in the fire place. We live in Darwin. We are still Aboriginal people. This is - still our country, and we ought under this Land Rights Act receive benefits from it (Kenbi Land Claim: transcript of proceedings 13/11/89:92).

There is much scope for more and varied historical research which may begin to assess the way in which a sense of 'identity' and 'history' have been constructed for Darwin and the place of Aborigines and non-Aborigines within these constructions. Such studies may also impact on an overall awareness of Aboriginal heritage in town areas and foster a willingness to comprehend that Darwin's past has a shared history and that this past is present in the continuing relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Methodology

In 1983 the Executive Director of the Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Authority (now Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority - AAPA), instigated a research project of which the primary aim was to show Larrakia attachment to and usage of land in Darwin, particularly at Kulaluk. Several researchers were commissioned to work on this project including Maria Brandl, Krimhilde Henderson, Ted Deveson and David Cooper. The project was funded by an Australian Heritage Commission, National Estate Project Grant. Papers were produced which concerned the past and present history of Kulaluk; Aboriginal groups in the town area; a land use survey of the area; and a vegetation study of the area. At the beginning of 1993 I was contacted by the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority to look at these papers with a view to updating and editing them for publication. The material was high quality but needed substantial editing, updating and analysis. The Australian Heritage Commission once again funded a project to continue this work on Kulaluk.

The Australian Heritage Commission Act was passed in 1975 and required the Heritage Commission to identify and register significant places in what was termed a Register of the National Estate. Significant places were defined by the Act as being:

components of the natural environment of Australia or the cultural environment of Australia, that have aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other special value for future generations as well as for the present community (Mulvaney 1989:xvii).

Mulvaney continues that the 'importance of the Register is that it alerts all Australians to the existence of places which, it is hoped, a mature community would wish to keep as a heritage for the future' (1989:xvii). Given these interpretations of the Register it is highly significant that the Australian Heritage Commission has continued to recognise this particular area of study. This report is the result of that continued funding.

Throughout 1994 I made regular visits to Kulaluk and much of the information in this report results from observations and communications with people over this period, in particular Topsy Secretary and Johnny MacMahon. Some oral histories have been recorded and these are included throughout the text in verbatim form in order to maintain a sense of identity for the 'teller'. Much more oral history work could however be done in this area. I have not commented extensively on Aboriginal sacred/secret sites within the Darwin area or at Kulaluk. This information is available under restricted access through the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority and the Northern Land Council but the scope of this report could not do justice to these sites.

A brief look at Darwin's settlement history in Chapter One provides the context for a study of Kulaluk and the present position of the Larrakia in Darwin socially, politically and geographically. Understanding the historical position of the Larrakia is vital to an understanding of the present position of Larrakia people in Darwin as their present actions and interactions are all informed by the history of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal contact and historically defined relationships. Markus' 1977 questioning of the 'uniformity' of the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal contact experience throughout Australia and his suggestion of the possibility of the impact of variables on the contact situation has pre-empted many important studies of 'contact' in areas throughout Australia (see Reynolds 1972, 1987; Loos 1982; Trigger 1992; Haebich 1992). More perceptive and creative analysis of this period would be achieved by a re-examination and reinterpretation of the archival material already accessed, further archival, library and museum searching. As Darwin's historiography grows new and important studies will emerge about this period which will show that the Aboriginal 'response to invasion was far more positive, creative and complex than generations of white Australians have been taught to believe' (Rowley 1984:18).

Chapter Two considers the introduction of legislation in respect of Aborigines, focussing particularly on the way in which this legislation sought to control and direct Aboriginal movement and relationships in the town areas and defined 'appropriate' Aboriginal living places. Barbara Cummings and Tony Austin have written much needed histories of the institutional life of Aboriginal people and the various policies implemented for the 'welfare' of Aborigines in Darwin using a combination of archival and oral sources. By focussing on legislation which endeavoured to control Aboriginal peoples' lives in terms of defining living places and movement it is possible to see how great the challenge was for Aboriginal people living in Darwin to petition for citizenship rights and for a legally sanctioned living place, chosen and determined by them.

Chapters Three and Four look at the launching of the claim to Kulaluk in the early 1970s and the protests, the petitions, the Kulaluk land claim hearing and Interim Aboriginal Land Commissioner Justice Ward's recommendations, the prolonged deliberations - at a local and federal level - over the granting of the lease and the continued challenges to Aboriginal control of the lease after it was granted. Cheryl Buchanan, an Aboriginal

student activist, came to the Territory in 1973 and tells the story of her involvement in the fight for Kulaluk in *We Have Bugger All*. Bill Day, a non-Aboriginal activist from Western Australia arrived in Darwin in 1970 and met up with Bobby Secretary and Bessie Murine who were camping in the bush next to a fresh water spring at Kulaluk. Day was to serve as a catalyst for people like Secretary and Murine who no longer wanted to live in government determined places and who were prepared to push for land rights. Day's involvement with the Gurindji claim for land at Wattie Creek provided them and him with the knowledge of how to conduct direct action or protest campaigns within the Aboriginal land rights era. Day edited and published the news sheet *Bunji* which was circulated nationally and internationally and successfully made public the knowledge of the Larrakia struggle to be recognised as traditional owners of Darwin area and to be compensated for having their land taken from them by having it returned. Day's recent publication, *Bunji: a story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement* together with the journal *Bunji* and Buchanan's work record with vivid detail the people, the passion, the frustrations and finally the success of the Kulaluk campaign. Krimhilde Henderson's and David Cooper's excellent histories of Kulaluk also provide much of the content in these two chapters.

Chapter Five considers the struggle for Kulaluk within the context of a broader recognition of Larrakia traditional ownership in the Darwin area. This is achieved by looking at some sites of significance to the Larrakia within Darwin and the level of understanding or respect attributed to these sites as part of Australia's history and heritage by the non-Aboriginal community. The level of importance attributed to a recognition of Aboriginal traditional ownership and heritage in town areas by non-Aborigines impacts considerably on an understanding of the granting of the Kulaluk Special Purpose Lease.

At a 1982 House of Representatives Inquiry into fringe-dwelling Aboriginal communities, Basil Sansom pointed out that Kulaluk was very different from other 'camps' in the Darwin area. He describes Kulaluk as 'Larakeah land in the full fledged traditional sense and nobody could ever question that for an instant. It gives the Kulaluk people a very different and extra super duper special status in terms of their camping site' (Australia 1982a). Although only a small percentage of Larrakia people in Darwin reside at Kulaluk, Kulaluk continues to be perceived as Larrakia land and is controlled by a management body, the Gwalwa Daraniki Association, which has in the main been headed by Larrakia people. Two senior Larrakia traditional owners, Topsy Secretary and Prince of Wales (Mitbul) reside there and are recognised by other Aboriginal people and the general Darwin public as senior traditional owners. This study therefore focuses on the 'place' of the Larrakia in Darwin's history and at Kulaluk yet recognises that many people, Aborigines and non-Aborigines alike had crucial and valid roles in the playing out of this history.

Commenting on the Larrakia photographic tribute at the Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences Topsy Secretary says:

Did you see them at the museum, did you see how they looked. Yeah they like warrior wooh when I see they my own bloody ancestors I though oh goodness they are real killer all right oooh geeee eh! ... Those people you saw at the museum they was a real wild people ... [My father] was a chief, when my grandfather passed away and his fathers, grandfathers, ancestors ohh they was a wild feller never let anybody come into Darwin nooo ... Oh they was a real killers in Darwin Larrakia tribe, you seen it? They look savage eh ... yeah my ancestors ... [Are you proud of them?] I'm proud of them! Know what they are. Now I'm weak, I let people in (pers. comm. Topsy Secretary 1994).

This history essentially looks at some of the events which occurred when the Larrakia people 'let people in' to Darwin and what happened when they endeavoured to have some of their traditional lands returned to them. This report also questions the understanding of and respect for Aboriginal traditional ownership in an area which has been heavily settled; the perceived incompatibility of traditional ownership with urban development and the effect of these issues on general perceptions of Larrakia people in Darwin.