

BUNJI

A Story of the
Gwalwa Daraniki Movement

BILL DAY



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In the year when man first walked on the moon, Australia cautiously lifted the veil of censorship. Audiences gasped at daring nude scenes in the subversively psychedelic stage musical *Hair* heralding the dawning of a new age. The evening news showed bloodied troops in Vietnam. Woodstock was real and the Manson cult only a sick aberration of the turn on, tune in and drop out generation.

Amongst the rocks and rainforest of Lameroo Beach, a horde of would-be hippies set up camp for the dry season of 1969 seeking flower-power with flagons and speed, crowding into late-night beer gardens, rocking and rolling or strumming Dylan protest songs while the locals sang Slim Dusty. By day, the long-haired southerners sweated as casual pick-up labour to unload trucks, trains and ships supplying the spreading frontier of mines ripping red, black and ochre-coloured rock from the guts of an ancient worn land.

The freaks sat with the blacks in the cheap front-row seats of the open-air Star Theatre, to cheer the heroes in the Wednesday 'Ranch Night' cowboy picture show. In the upper dress circle the segregated white gentry frowned down at the lost sons and daughters of mid-sixties suburbia. The times, they agreed, were changing.

Attracted to the alternative lifestyle and looking for work, I hitchhiked up the corrugated northwest coastal highway from Perth, arriving shortly after Darwin's hundredth anniversary of white settlement. Around the rocky point from Goyder's first landfall I laid my sleeping bag on a mattress of dry grass and joined the commune. It was idyllic on the beach just a metre above the lapping tide. The freedom we found in the warm winter sun was thrilling as we rubbed wet clay on our bare bodies and pranced on the shellgrit sand in joyful rituals that parodied the intricate dances of the Aboriginal people who had once launched canoes from the same shore.

The sticks of dynamite tossed from the cliff top to frighten Aborigines were fortunately not necessary when the frustrated city council moved to drive the hippies from their lairs. Reluctant to lose spectacular views of a sheltered harbour where seven-metre tides swirled to the cycles of a tropic moon, the campers scrawled 'We shall not be moved' on the steep descending pathway down the jungle-clad cliff face. They sang 'Let the sun shine in' and spoke of peace and love while the jukeboxes played the Beatles' 'Revolution'.

Inevitably, like the rainbow birds, the Lameroo squatters migrated southwards for summer before the first October storm, leaving their litter to the scavenging hermit crabs that clicked and clawed over empty cans and broken bottles

on the deserted beach. Towering murky clouds dropped blobs of cleansing rain through flashes of flickering lightning and terrible thunder, cracking and rumbling in the gloom. Beneath the dark sky the shining silver roofs of Darwin were a spot of sparkle in the vast black-green coastal forests.

Although the brief show of defiance by the hippies failed to stop the evictions, I and a few stragglers found part-time jobs on the waterfront and moved into town for the monsoon months. We heaved boxes in the holds of old coastal traders alongside Communist veterans of the campaign for Aboriginal citizenship and dark-skinned old timers who had struggled to be accepted as human beings. Their creased faces told a story that they only reluctantly recalled. Time had moved on for them.

Others were only now experiencing the freedoms of citizenship. Barefooted elders in the cavernous Bamboo Lounge of the Don Hotel, a run-down retreat for Aborigines, would tell tales in exchange for a frothing pot of cold Swan Lager. Young men in broad-brimmed hats yarned of faraway cattle stations while lithe black women eased the wallets of careless 'captains'. These people spoke freely to a white man who would listen, honouring me with their openness.

My future wife, Polly Wharekura, flew up from Perth in time for the birth of our daughter in late December. From the Tuhoe tribe of the Mataatua marae in Rotorua, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Polly did not share my love for the tropical racial melting pot. Schoolgirls of her era had their mouths rinsed with soap and water for speaking their native Maori tongue, leaving her with little sympathy for blacks who did not strive, as she had done, to lift themselves from the poverty into which they were born.

Coming north was a move to cramped hot rented rooms where prickly heat irritated the skin of the restless crying baby until, after many months, we were allotted a Housing Commission two-bedroomed flat. Settled at last, we married in the registry office, followed by celebratory drinks in the notorious 'hot and cold bar' of the Darwin Hotel. Polly had sacrificed her ambitions to my obsessions.

Years later, newspaper interviews correctly described me as 'an outsider', who 'sympathised with Aborigines because they seemed outsiders in their own country' (*Australian* 15 July 1985, 11). Perhaps the analyst who reads this book will find clues to the causes of that alienation. The searcher may also recognise many instances of what Carl Jung called 'synchronicity'. This succession of apparent coincidences or chance happenings began from my friendship with a well-known bar room character called simply, 'Parap'.

Parap had been named after the inner city suburb around the Pioneers' Cemetery because he had been born there and now spent much of his time in an ill-reputed bar of the same name. He had been an Aboriginal godfather to initiates of several hinterland communities. A short man with an asthmatic wheezing voice

and grinding teeth, Parap was always ready to yarn over a drink about the heroic deeds of his 'daddy', Nadpur, better known as Fred Waters.

'In my ditha's day,' said Parap, using the native word, 'we had chuck-in collections. We throw money into a blanket, for the fight'.

Nadpur had been a strong leader in the post-war years who had armed his followers with sticks and pickets and urged them to march to the town centre demanding higher pay and equality (*Bunji* June 1982, 11).¹ He had been arrested and escorted in a government vehicle to the desert settlement of Haasts Bluff but the yearning for equality was not doused. Aborigines who experienced those times were conscious that their rights had not been given easily.

Parap told me that the Larrakia people who owned Darwin still lived. He would take me to meet one man who camped behind the drive-in theatre at Coconut Grove. There we could talk about the things the Gurindjis were saying and I could get an interview for publication in *Origin*, a journal of Aboriginal affairs. My report would show how little the Aboriginal situation had changed since the last of the Sydney clan allegedly died a beggar, over one hundred years earlier.

The bus to the northern suburbs took us to the Dolphin Hotel, a group of motel-style buildings in paddocks of long spear-grass facing the busy arterial Bagot Road. Opposite were overgrown farmlets and mango orchards and behind them, along the sea front, the scattered rows of old coconut palms from failed plantations. The growers had retreated before the ravenous termites that turn dreams to dust across northern Australia.

We walked across earthworks where subdividers were flattening this semi-rural landscape and crossed a knee-deep fresh water creek lying parallel with the coast line. A football-oval-width of grassy black-sand plain lay between the creek and the dense mangroves flourishing in the shallow bay. Looming to the northeast was the skeletal frame of the Paspalis Drive-in screen and the back of a large red Woolworths sign atop a distant supermarket, forming the northern boundary. Five hundred metres to the south, the grass ran into a wall of monsoon rainforest that extended another two kilometres around the bay to the muddy banks of Ludmilla Creek.

Ahead of us, as I piggybacked my guide through the waterlilies and reeds, was a flattened mound of cleared and hardened sand topped by a leafy native beech tree. A low shelter of a few dented corrugated iron sheets nailed to a frame of rough paperbark poles was part-hidden behind the single tree. Beside the structure was an open fireplace with upturned drums for seats, all circled by littered bottles, cans, plastic and papers.

A grey-bearded man, wearing only a pair of stained dark trousers held up by a string belt, rose from a creaking wire bed covered by a bare foam mattress

a site chosen by his father, Frank Secretary (*Bunji* 2, 1971). By 1965 only one-twelfth of the carefully selected Bagot Reserve remained, and that fraction was hemmed in by a modern housing estate (Woodward 1974, 55-63).

Rows of windowless unfurnished blockhouses, a scattering of silver aluminium 'transitional' huts, a few model bungalows, the long single men's quarters and dining hall, and a dilapidated school were huddled on the reduced reserve area behind the single entrance gate, guarded by an administration office and a colonial-style stilted house for the superintendent, Les Wilson. Unauthorised entry was prohibited, warned an imposing signboard. Bobby's camp, catching a fresh ocean breeze, was luxuriously free in comparison to the reserve.

Frank Secretary had not passed on much else of the old ways to his children, taking his knowledge to the grave; but he had grieved over the loss of his land. He earned his name working in the newspaper office print room (Hill 1951, 127), yet was still able to paddle his family across the harbour in a dugout canoe for ceremonies with relatives at Belyuen. There Bobby's cousin, the Prince of Wales, carried the royal line of King George and King Miranda, keeping alive the dances and songs taught by the daribahs, or grey-haired Larrakia elders.

Bobby's enthusiasm for action was infectious. He seemed to have been waiting for his moment in history. 'If I give this land away, what is going to happen', he lamented. 'Young children of mine, when they grow up, they will say, "Why did Grandpa give this land away?"' (Day 1978, 3).

One condescending answer later came from a white historian: 'Like many other people, the Larrakias are victims of Darwin's growth. As the town has expanded, areas of unoccupied land have dwindled, but I do not 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).

Aboriginal place names, unrecorded on any map, were commonly used in conversation. In the same way, most of Bobby's friends had an Aboriginal name and a 'whitefella name'. Parap said his real name was Billawarra, the black cockatoo dreaming place. Bobby was Kulamarini and Bessie was Jidiwin. Emery Point, named after a naval lieutenant, was remembered as Gundal and sacred Old Man Rock, off Casuarina Beach, would always remain Daribah Nungalinya (*Bunji* 2, 1971).

Our conversation was broken by the sudden startling appearance of Bessie Murine charging down the track from the mangroves with a star picket held high like a samurai sword. She screamed abuse at Bob, who darted behind me shouting for mercy as though he was about to lose his head. She veered to my right, he dodged to my left holding me like a shield between them. Bessie was intent on revenge for imagined unfaithfulness and her lover cowered in terror. Parap reassured me and

added that it was common for Bessie to burn all Bobby's clothes or drive a stake through all the pots and pans. Not surprisingly they had few possessions.

Later, meditating on my year-and-a-half in Darwin, I was inspired to write a poem (Bunji 1, 1971):

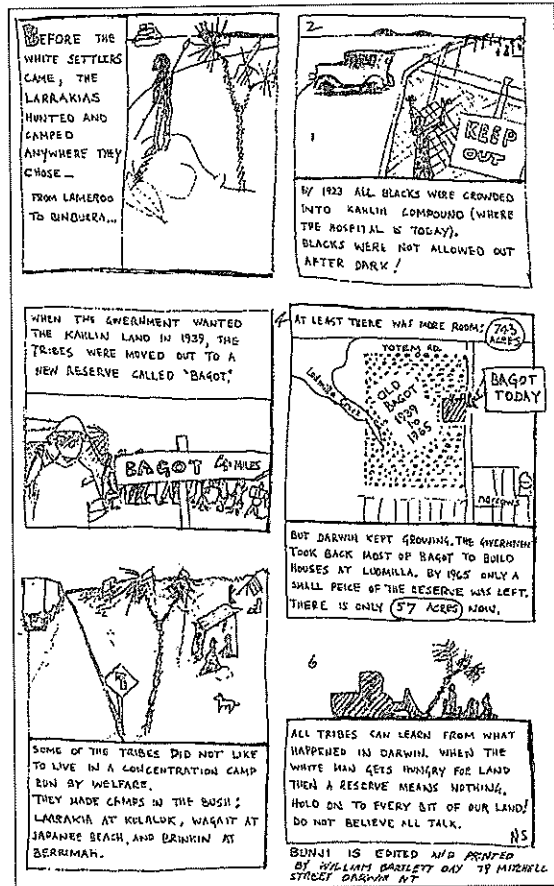
*In days gone by we had no fear,
We fought the whites with club and spear.
Brave old people died for their land,
Their bones are buried in the sand.
When white man gave us wine and beer,
We put away our club and spear.
Now we drink and fight each other,
The whites are laughing at us, brother.*

The article mourning 'The Last of the Larrakia' was never written, although several journalists took up the theme (Age 5 August 1971, 8; West Australian 11 January 1972, 7). Instead a telephone call to Jim Bowditch, editor of the NT News, put Bobby on the front page at 'his little-known camp near the drive-in' (NT News 20 May 1971, 1). Now the claim of the Larrakias would test the sincerity of a government attempting to sugar the bitter pill of the disastrous Blackburn judgment. And Kulaluk was central enough to attract media coverage, unlike the distant better-known disputes.

Meanwhile my orientation tours continued during breaks from the wharf. Along a short strip of rust-stained sand we searched among leaning pearling sheds for Roy Mudpul and his group from Delissaville. They called their camp Japanee Beach after the oriental pearl divers, but pointed out the old fresh water spring where the railway dam had been excavated to satisfy the thirst of the Larrimah-bound steam trains.

Husky-voiced Roy knew the Larrakia names for the rocks, water holes, trees and bays that held great powers. He had been a willing pupil of the elders and now his prematurely grey hair gave him added authority. Roy and his wife Maggie gathered around them the fun-loving Wagaitj musicians and dancers, so that the sound of the didgeridoo and clapsticks or the smell of cooking shellfish usually revealed their shifting 'sit-down' camp site. All agreed to defend their inner-city hideaway.

The key to a successful movement was going to be the big camp out at Berrimah known as the Nine Mile. Here the men wore the jeans and elastic-sided boots of the cattlemen who worked the stations south to Katherine. Others had migrated north from the regimented Daly River Mission, recognising astute Brinkin men like Major Bangun, Roy Kelly and Leo Pudpud as their leaders.



Bunji used comic strips to make its points such as this history lesson by Neil Simpson in *Bunji*, October 1972.

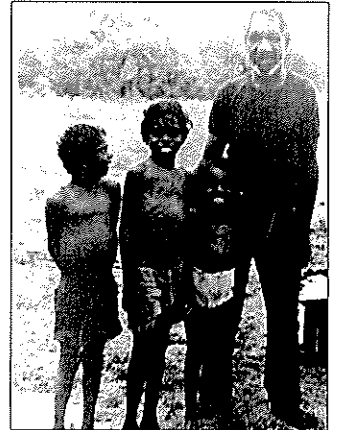
Sitting on the rusted steel watermain beside the Stuart Highway, families, ringers and pensioners listened to Parap's emotional introduction. They knew that they too would be evicted whenever the land was needed. I repeated the message:

Darwin is Larrakia country. Bobby Secretary is fighting for his tribe. They want a part of their land. A place called Kulaluk. Bagot is on Kulaluk. If you live on Larrakia land, help the Larrakia. Most of them are dead and their land was stolen. The same thing can happen to all others who get pushed around like Kulamarini's tribe. 'We won't get pushed around any more', said Kulamarini (Bobby Secretary) (Bunji 1, 1971).

We spoke to another potential leader out at the Nine Mile. Harry Wilson was an enthusiastic young bushman who had escaped the police roundup of mixed-race children and so had kept his language and culture, along with a love of horses and cattle. He was wary of land rights in the bush where often the rifle was law, but at the Moyle River, south of the Daly, Harry was preparing to muster cattle. *'That is our country', said Harry Wilson. 'No-one will kick us off. Never!'* (Bunji 1, 1971).²

The seal was set for Darwin's three main language groups to unite in a common purpose. *Brinkin, Wagaitj, Larrakia, these three tribes are going to fight together.*

By midyear, the Darwin urban land claims had gathered momentum. In other states, the protests which followed the Springbok rugby tour were a pleasing new development, despite Australia's own racist history. Aborigines gained courage



Bobby Secretary at his Coconut Grove camp with his niece and two nephews in December 1971. Photo Bill Day.

watching the front of radical students, church groups, Aboriginal organisations and political opposition parties, in their stand against racism in sport.

At Kulaluk, relatives came from Bagot for meetings on the rise under the shady tree. The mound was an old jungle fowl's nest from the days when the grassy field had been covered by the coastal monsoon-forest. The loud cries of these hen-sized birds could still be heard from the thickets on moonlit nights as they scratched up mounds from the jungle floor to bury their eggs in the decaying heaps. Appropriately the tree and the mound were chosen as a symbol of the Larrakia awakening.

From their model home on the reserve came city council worker Nipper Rankin and his Larrakia wife, Josephine, with their children. Bobby's sister Topsy and younger brother Gabriel came to listen. Jackson Lee, as rebellious as his name, set up home with quick tempered Mary Kunyee from the Daly River Mission, while old Mickey, Bessie's first husband, was to spend his last months with his promised wife. Fortunately, Lawrence Urban was in town from his retirement to a cattle station



Left to right: Mr Lawrence Urban, Mr Bobby Secretary, Mr Norman Harris and Mr Bill Day

From left to right: Lawrence Urban, Bobby Secretary, Norman Harris and Bill Day. Photo courtesy of the *Northern Territory News*.

(*NT News* 27 May 1971, 6). A stately soft-spoken Larrakia daribah, he had been sentenced to four months gaol for fomenting the 1951 strikes.

Another daribah, Norman Harris, or Barral, had brought his swag to join the camp. His name came from the Harris family, owners of the Star Theatre, for whom he had worked as a young man. Topsy Secretary had been his promised wife, and this gave Barral rights in the Larrakia danggalaba clan but now, in his late fifties, he preferred the single man's life.³ Knowledgeable in the ways of the whites and an authority on both Larrakia and Wagaitj traditional lore, he spoke with a firmness that was not to be contradicted.

A fine mixture of generations, we decided to make a token protest to acknowledge National Aborigines Day 1971, the first ever held in Darwin. But talk was cheap. When the morning came the enthusiasm for walking ten kilometres into the city centre had faded. Some were still sleeping, others sipping steaming tea from chipped enamel mugs by the smoking fires. Only the urging of long-haired fellow wharfie Richard Shields revived the optimism.⁴ As Bobby's nephew, Richard was able to stir up emotion like a league coach at half-time. Miraculously, the people rose up, took up the painted placards and set off; some shoeless, the others wearing what they could. Numbers rose to twenty along the route in what were the first nervous steps of a long march (*NT News* 10 July 1971).

NOTES

1. See also *Tribune* 15 February 1951, 8 and McGinness 1991, 59–60. In 1971 another Fred Waters, of the Maranungku people, became an active supporter of the town land claims.
2. Harry Wilson later established the Peppimenarti cattle station and represented its people on the Northern Land Council.
3. The Larrakia danggalaba (crocodile) clan genealogy is recorded in Brandl et al 1983, 25–49.
4. Rikki Shields, born in 1942, has lived in Europe and Britain since 1986. *Bulletin* magazine (12 November 1991, 37) describes him as: 'Film-maker, poet, photographer, Aboriginal rights publicist and tireless campaigner for European museums to repatriate Aboriginal remains ... a driven man with a romantic soul'.