

Gordon Mackay and the Coffin Family as Nyiyaparli

by Dr William B Day

2011

'Narratives from the North-West of Western Australia in Njijapali, Language of the Paljgu: Volume I, Narratives; Volume 2, Vocabulary, Record', Carl G von Brandenstein (1968:XVIII).

The above text by Carl von Brandenstein is composed from interviews with 'Gordon Mackay-Wanna ... [aged] 72, of Marble Bar, W.A., has narrated Nos. 1-13, 15-32, 34-40, 46-51; in Nos. 15, 17, 39 he converses with Hickey and in no.38 with his younger brother Roy.' Von Brandenstein continues:

Gordon Mackay-Wanna, the dominant figure among Njijapali narrators, went to school in Perth. Though he can read and write he was really never keen to practise it. He preferred station life and station work. After years on some coastal stations he drove cattle from Roy Hill to Port Hedland, An accident in which he was kicked by a horse, made him retire, first to Port Hedland and later to Marble Bar. The latter place appealed to him more since Port Hedland became industrialised.

Gordon is a Pannaga [skin name], but he could easily be taken for a Paltjarri because of his gentle and friendly nature. His keen sense of justice and tactfulness make him a real offspring of the Paljgu heroes, the Tamiarra or 'gentlemen'. But there is no need to describe the qualities of Gordon's character. The subtlety and flourish of his diction speaks out for him. To compare his verbal style with that of Robert Churnside, the Ngarluma speaker of Part I, is like reading Greek and then compare it with Latin, Of course Njijapali lends itself more to enclitic particles than does Ngarluma.

Brandenstein goes on to describe his other informants. They are:

2. Hickey – Ikipangu about 58, of New Pilbara, WA, has narrated No. 14; in Nos. 15, 17 and 39 he converses with Gordon Mackay. Hickey will be custodian of what is left of Paljgu tradition. He is also influenced by the religious centre of Jigalong; a man who believes in the strength of the 'Law' and its rituals, a man who loves his country and his people.
3. Jack Forrest(ee) – Maljurungu in his late 60s, of Mt Newman, WA. Has narrated Nos. 7, 33, 42-44.
4. Roy Mackay about 60, of Marble Bar, WA, converses as the main speaker with Gordon Mackay, his older brother, in No. 38. Roy is an easy talker, willing to play his part and help his brother Gordon. They harmonise despite the difference of temperament.
5. Ted Richard and Joe Noddy father and son-in-law, of Meekatharra, WA, contributed the message to Jack Forrest... Both speak Njijapali as second language beside Wadjjarri. Both

were kind and helpful to the author who was a newcomer to the area at that time. Joe Noddy died recently.

Under the heading, 'Homeland and History' Brandenstein (1968:VI) writes:

1.1 In the past Njijapali and Paljgu were regarded as two different tribes, In A Capell's Survey (1963:A.31) the location for Njijapali was given as "near Lake Disappointment", whilst the Paljgu were correctly placed (1963:A.2) at the "Head of the De Grey and Oakover Rivers; northeast of upper Fortescue River". In reality the Paljgu is the name of the tribe and Njijapali the dialect spoken by them. On the maps of Radcliffe-Brown (1912), Connelly (1932) and Tindale (1940) Paljgu is the only name shown in the Roy Hill/Nullagine District. Daisy Bates has a 'Balgu' vocabulary in her collection from Nullagine (see below) which contains only Njijapali language. But the name Njijapali does not occur in these sources.

1.2 Geoff. N O'Grady (1966:84) tried to establish and treat Paljgu-Pandjima as "dialects of a single language". The attempt to join Pandjima and Paljgu, which are by the way tribal, not language names, purely on the basis of shared vocabulary must be regarded as a failure in the light of the present studies. In spite of the "sharing of 79 percent of their basic vocabulary" (op. cit.), - a figure which is difficult to maintain when more than 100 words are compared - "the two languages are different for structure, verbal concept and origin; Pandjima belongs to Ngarluma, Njijapali to the WD [Western Desert] group. The two are Australian relatives no more than English and Latin (in Europe) of Persian, Turkish and Arabic (in the Middle East)" as I pointed out in Part I of the Narratives (p.XIII,3). It is, however, noteworthy that Ngaala-warangka, a South Pandjima dialect, is indeed a mixture of Pandjima and Njirrikudu-Njijapali.

2.1 According to their tradition the Paljgu came from the east, i.e. from the direction of Lake Disappointment, not too long ago. In the typical struggle of tribes of the interior to reach the seaboard by pushing their western neighbours or by filling the vacuum left by them in their westward movement, the Paljgu had penetrated to the Weedi Wollie Creek [sic], southern tributary of the Fortescue River, at about Mulga Downs Station [boundary?]. Long and bitter feuds between them and their western neighbours, the Pandjima, for the hunting grounds on the fertile floodlands of the Upper Fortescue were eventually halted by the white conquest which also fixed the boundaries between the Paljgu and various Njamal groups in the north-west.

(Page VII) 2.4 In the south the ‘slopeside’ (Njirrikud--) speaking Paljgu in the Ophthalmia Ranges down to Mt Newman faced the southern Pandjima who spoke Ngaala-warngka [Narlawangga], and the otherwise obscure Wiridinja; in the south-east the Fortescue River flats with Mt Frank 20 km from Balfour Downs Station as a dividing point, separated the njirrikudu Paljgu from the puudditharra who belonged together with the Tarrgudi, that is ‘unbroken’ speaking WD [Western Desert] groups.

Language (Brandenstein 1968:VII).

Brandenstein (1968:VII) writes:

All tribal languages of the north-west show a mutual influence ... Already Njijaparli had taken on or exchanged a considerable amount of vocabulary from the neighbouring Panjima... Moreover Njijapali began to establish itself in modern times, i.e. since the 1940s, as a commonly accepted song language of the whole Pilbara. This is mainly due to the poetical usage by a few outstanding personalities who were equally involved in the social reform movement of the pindan group ... as well as in corroborees and individual tabi song making. Thus it happened that Njijapali is still flourishing, though little is left of the original Paljgu lineage, and only a few actual speakers survive.

Brandenstein (1968:VIII) continues his discussion of language:

3.1 ...More sophisticated informants like Gordon Mackay experienced years of living in the western coastal areas and could not help taking on individually a certain amount of western, in this case Karierra and Njamal, vocabulary. Despite these influences his Njijapali inflexion remained intact...

3.2 Thus the Njijapali material offered in the Narratives is predominantly reflecting expression and style of the only important Njijapali speaker left...

The remainder of the report consists of stories transcribed from tape recordings made in Njijapali with Gordon Mackay and others and translations by von Brandenstein.

‘Prologue’ (Brandenstein 1968:1):

This section is by Gordon Mackay, Port Hedland (2-Mile Camp). 22.10.1964 (Tape 2, 22; Diary III 229-230). The translation is: ‘I left word on paper how we people lived. Nobody will keep a law that is finished. We are getting scarce, we Njijapali people. But our children will see on paper how we live. Soon already there might be no people left at all. Nobody will keep our territory. Soon we will come to a halt. So I am going to put this word down. Our children are going to write it down on paper, yes, they will read it and cry for us, perhaps, that we Njijapali people are no more. Finish!’ (p.1).

'The Giant', by Gordon Mackay, Marble Bar, 21.9.1968 (Tape 23-B-12; Diary XV 54-59)

In his translation notes of Gordon's story, 'The Giant', Brandenstein (1968:19) says Mangurdu is 'flood' and also the proper Njijapali name of the Fortescue River from its upper course down to about Wittenoom. Downstream from Roy Hill salt-marshes extend which Gordon calls in his English 'the floodlake (country)'. Its western end once formed the boundary between Paljgu and Pandjima.

'About Wardirra Law' Gordon Mackay, Port Hedland, 28.9.1965 (Tape 6-B-5; Diary VI 4-5, 8-9) (Brandenstein 1968:33).

The Narratives include a restricted story entitled 'About Wardirra Law'. In this section, Gordon talks about initiation songs. He ends (p.33):

Nowadays it is nothing. We have forgotten it. There are no Njijapalis anymore. We are only a few living on the Shaw River and we two here (in Marble Bar), (6) we are scattered without our old people. (7) There is no one to listen to, the singers are all finished. In the past we have been more, finish! I keep describing it myself enough, how the people parted and that there is no population.

Brandenstein notes (p.35) '(5) Marwarda songs represent the oldest type of sacred songs from the east which serve the instruction of initiands. They are followed historically by Juuna, Winirrigi, Marduidja and recently by Mirlgu from the south-east. There [sic] themes include the tradition of the fate of the extinct giant kangaroo. (6) Gordon refers to his brother Roy and himself, living in Marble Bar. Ikipangu (Hickey) was not living there then. (7) Gordon means to say that he and the other Njijapalis do not live in the old Njijapali people's territory anymore.'

'Sorcery with Stone Balls and Snake Eggs', Gordon Mackay, Marble Bar, 15.9.1966. Tape 16-B-3; Diary XIII 133-136. (Brandenstein 1968:56).

In this story, Gordon refers to round stones that have been taken from Depuche Island both by Aboriginal sorcerers and by sailors who use the stones for ballast. Brandenstein refers to the stones as 'snake's eggs' (p.58). Gordon says:

By law they were left to the Karierra and Ngarluma. We in the east had nothing like it.' After describing how dangerous the stones are, Gordon repeats, 'In the east we have nothing of the sort; Jindjiparndi, Panjima and Paljgu were not concerned, only Karierra and Ngarluma; the Ngangumarda might be. I have no idea of it, whilst in reality the home for the [stone balls] is with the Karierra and Ngarluma, finish!

Obviously, when Gordon refers to 'we in the east' he is referring to his Nyiyaparli people and others, making clear from his statement that he does not identify as Karierra, as some have said.

'Two Njamal Stories: shield making by Eagle Pair and Owl: about Moolyala near Marble Bar' by Gordon Mackay, Marble Bar, 4.10.1968, Tape 24-B-1; Diary XV 86-89 (Brandenstein (1968:79).

Gordon Mackay introduces his story:

I will tell you the story of the eagles who had both carved and cork-bark shield when they were humans, long time ago.' Gordon continues, 'Though I tell this story, the eagle actually belongs to the Njamal people. We have not got cork-bark shields, as we live in the south. Our beef-wood shields were not made for us by the eagles but by somebody else. Beef-wood is too far away for the Njamal. The eagle was a Njamal in this district north of the river, wherever it is, I don't know. As far as the story is concerned they pointed that out to us. I should speak as a Njijapali man, though I heard the story only in Njamal.

'Pools in the Fortescue near Roy Hill' recorded with Gordon Mackay, Marble Bar, 12.7.1966. Tape 11-B-18; Diary IX 88 a –c (Brandenstein 1968:85-86):

In this section, Gordon relates another story in Njijapali. He states:

I will tell you the story of Roy Hill (1) and surroundings: Tjiwiddi (2), a fish increase centre (2) Local people let this be an increase centre. (3) As soon as the rain fell the floods used to run from the hills into the river. (4) They used to sit and mash up leaves. (3) After being mashed up the leaves usually got carried by the flood to the big river. They named the district from pool to pool: [names pools].

Day (2010:16; Appendix 3) lists 'Djiwirdi' as a DAA registered ceremonial/mythological site ID 11802 near Roy Hill station homestead.

In Brandenstein's translation (1968:86), Roy Hill is 'Marnda Panda-rra-nba' [could be a descriptive term] and Tjiwidi is translated as Tiuidi (see Appendix 3 [Day 2010:16]). On page 171 Brandenstein lists 'Parrimuna' as 'hill near Roy Hill'. On page 173 Tiuidi' is translated as 'Roy Hill, the hill itself'. On page 261, 'Roy Hill' is listed as 'Marnda Pandarranba (station) Marnda Tiuidi (near Station)'.

Brandenstein (1968:148) transcribes a story titled 'Vendetta' recorded with Gordon Mackay at Marble Bar on 14 October 1968 (Tape 24-B-7; Diary XV 108-110).

Gordon begins:

I'll tell you a story of long ago when war-bands speared each other at Warrawandu Creek'. In his notes, Brandenstein adds that Warrawandu Creek is 25 miles south of Mount Minduru in Sylvania Station country [south of Newman]. Gordon continues, 'They had killed Jurruru (secretly) and thrown (his body) on top of his own spinifex shelter as if he was laying there

in the shade as usual. But they had seen the killers, and the people from the west who had come under Murrbulungu, Murrbulanguru, then the conqueror of my grandfather, went back.

Brandenstein notes on page 168 that Juurrurru was murdered by Murrbulungu and that Murrbulungu was the killer of Juurrurru, G Mackay's grandfather. The story relates how Murrbulungu eventually sent his son as a marlulu (initiated) back to Minindji described as 'a bog hole with gum trees right around, 21 miles from Roy Hill' (p. 150), where the men took revenge for the past murder according to Gordon Mackay, and speared the son of Murrbulungu 'because his father had killed my father' (p. 148).

'Taruru: Aboriginal song poetry from the Pilbara', Brandenstein (1974:65).

In his book, Brandenstein (1974:65) describes Gordon Mackay – Warna, as 'over seventy, and lives in Marble Bar. He is the most sophisticated of all song-makers known to me in the Pilbara, and he went to a good school in Perth in his youth. Although Njijapali is his main language, he understands and speaks also Karierra, Ngarluma, Jindiparndi, and Njamal, and he has a good knowledge of Aboriginal traditions. He is now camp leader at Marble Bar and a councillor.'

Michael Robinson (2011)¹ cites Tindale's interview with Roy Mackay, although it is disputed that the description of Banyjima territory comes from Mackay.

135. While in Pilgangoora Tindale also spoke to a man named Roy McKay who gave him information [6-12] and drew him a map [6-31]. 'The Mandara were a people who lived partly on Marillana & W of Poonda. They died out, being replaced by the Pandjima who came N. and Eastward from the Hamersley Range. The Pandjima also drove the Bailgu out of Mulga Downs area before white man times' [6-12].

136. This may be the source of the information in his publication that the Banjima were moving eastward, but it is difficult to see how he reached the conclusion that this put pressure on the Nyiyaparli.

137. Tindale's journals make it clear that his informant here was Roy McKay because he stated that he had '[w]orked all day with a fullblooded native, Roy Mackay...' (Tindale 1953, p. 307; [6-12]) and then proceeded to set out information 'he' gave him. Mackay, Tindale observed, was 'a Kariara on his father's side & Nyamal on his mother's, but reared in Bailgu country...' (ibid, p. 307; [6-12]). Dr Palmer is not so certain about the source being Roy Mackay (he states only that the informant was 'possibly Roy MacKay' – (Palmer 2010 [185];².) but Dr Draper believes Tindale's information about the Banjima having displaced the Palyku from the Mulga Downs area is from a 'dubious informant statement' and that the informant was 'uncertain' (Draper 2010 [45]).

¹ Michael Robinson, *Banjima Trial Area Anthropological Report*, 2011.

²Footnote 31: Later on Dr Palmer appears to accept that the information came from Roy Mackay (Palmer 2010 [189])

Dr Draper does not say what his grounds are for regarding the information as dubious or for stating that it came from an uncertain source when Tindale's journal clearly identifies the source by name and as being a man who was raised in Palyku country.

McDonald claims Tindale was mistaken in describing the 'Mandara' as a separate group. McDonald claims the word comes from 'munda' or hill, and refers to 'hill people'. In his report, McDonald (2000:8-9) states:

The term is more likely to be a local rather than a 'tribal' name or a descriptive term for 'hill' or upland people. Indeed, Palmer (1977:24) states that the *Mundara* [*Mandara*] are 'a subgroup of the Bandjima [Panyjima] people.' The term *munda/manda* would seem to be derived from a word common in Hamersley Range languages for hill/rock/stone [*manda/marnda/marnta*] (Dench 1991:230). The suffix *-ra*, according to Dench, is common in various Pilbara languages as an indication of people from a particular place (*pers. comm.*, September 1999; Dench 1987:2...).

During my research between 2001 and 2003 it was difficult to separate Palyku and Nyiyaparli genealogies. Many people mentioned the similarities in the languages or dialects, describing the two as either 'soft' or 'hard' in their pronunciation. Brandenstein (1967:2) says Palyku speak Nyiyaparli. As Jack McPhee told this writer in 2003, '[People] could be Palyku or Nyiyaparli, much the same thing.' Horton (1994:842) states: 'The Palyku people speak the Nyiyaparli language.' Kohn (2003:1) notes:

The statements by Dench's Panyjima informants support the view that Palyku is the name of the speech community and Nyiyaparli the language or dialect name (Dench 1991 cited in Kohn 2003:1). Due to conflicting reports from speakers of Nyiyaparli, I am not convinced as yet that whether Palyku is only the name of the speech community or is a linguistic variety of Nyiyaparli in itself.

Brandenstein (1967:2) describes Nyiyaparli as 'the western most member of the large Western Desert group.' Although Kohn (2003:2) says Brandenstein's classification is 'controversial', she notes similarities between Nyiyaparli language and Western Desert languages while the language also shares features with central Pilbara groups. According to Sharp and Thieberger (1992:4), Nyiyaparli 'is the language of songs sung throughout the Pilbara.' Gordon Yuline states: 'Nyiyaparli, Palyku, Banyjima, these languages sort of one family – pretty close. We sing in Nyiyaparli at our ceremonies.'³

³ Nyiyaparli field notes p.60

Day (2003) reports that the relationship between language and country is important to Nyiyaparli. If this is so, Gordon Mackay's identity could come as keeper of the language. According to Day (2003) Gordon Yuline says, 'language was there already'. Day's report continues:

Gordon explains that when the world was created the languages were associated with each country 'like Chinese or Japanese'. However, songs and rituals may be exchanged or given to another tribe. Nyiyaparli identity therefore comes from the connection between language and country.⁴

Nyiyaparli identity does not automatically come through birth in Nyiyaparli country, despite a knowledge of Nyiyaparli language and customs. Gordon Yuline gives examples of the descendants of Maggie, of Roy Hill station, who are presently included in the IBN and the Nyiyaparli claims. On page seventy-two of his 1953 genealogies, Tindale lists the mother of Gordon and Roy Mackay as Kariyarra and their father as Nyamal. Their mother, Maggie, was from Munda Station near Port Hedland, owned by the Mackays who also owned Roy Hill. Brandenstein and Thomas (1974:65) state: 'Gordon Mackay-Warna is over seventy and lives in Marble Bar ... Although Njijapali is his main language, he speaks also Karierra, Ngaluma, Jindiparndi and Njamal, and he has a good knowledge of Aboriginal traditions.' Brandenstein (1982?) describes Gordon Mackay as his informant between 1964 and 1971 and 'the last good speaker of Nyiyaparli who enabled me [Brandenstein] to put down a considerable amount of material on tape and in writing which has not yet been published.'⁵

William Coffin was the half brother of the two Mackays, sharing the same mother. He was born on Roy Hill Station. His mother was Maggie and his father was from Millstream (Coffin in Jamieson 1978:3. See Day 2005). Referring to Tindale (1953:72), Day (2005:1) states (see also Appendix 4):

In the 1890s, Maggie Mardjuwiya and a Nyamal man named George Mackay were employed by the Mackay brothers on Mundabullangana Station. Some time before the birth of their first son the couple were relocated inland to the Mackay property at Roy Hill. Maggie and George's son, Gordon Mackay, was born on the station in about 1899 and his brother Roy Mackay in about 1900. Both became acknowledged cultural leaders within the Nyiyaparli tribe. George Mackay died in 1927. Maggie's second partner was a 'half-caste' teamster named Billy Coffin who drove teams of seventeen horses from Port Hedland and Roebourne to Roy Hill carting goods for the Mackay brothers.

⁴ Nyiyaparli field notes p.60.

⁵ See AIATSIS audio tapes Nos A446a;A446b;A445b;A447a;A447b.

According to a translation by Gordon Yuline, Gordon Mackay describes himself as Kariyarra in a taped interview made with Brandenstein in 1966 (AIATSIS tape 447b). Mackay allegedly says, ‘I forgot about my language Kariyarra ... My grandmother is from Munda [station] and she went to Roy Hill. I am a Kariyarra, belong to here [?] ... I went to Nyiyaparli people up the top end. I left my Kariyarra behind...’. Considering the various ways Nyiyaparli define their identity (see Appendix 1), and the recordings of Brandenstein, the primary identity of Gordon Mackay would appear to be Nyiyaparli. It could then be said to follow that the descendants of Gordon Mackay's half brother, William Coffin, would most likely also identify and be identified as Nyiyaparli.

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Appendix 1

Identifying as, and being accepted as, Nyiyaparli (from Day 2003:5-7).

2.4 'Recruitment'

Susie Yuline explained that identity may come from the great grandparents who in her children's case was Palyku, so that some of her children are in the Nyiyaparli claim and some in the Palyku claim. As she said, 'If they all come on my side, there will be no one for grandfather's people. Then my grandfather's country going free to another people. That's why I put my daughters there.' This form of 'recruitment' appears to have a traditional basis and ensures there is some form of continuity in land ownership, as for Martu estates.

Gordon Yuline emphasises identity through grandfathers, giving a 'choice' of which way to go.⁶ This rule overcomes the problem of people being born out of their country. That is, identity is taken back two generations to before people moved or were moved away from their lands. Due to the number of ancestors, this option also adds to 'choice' of identity. Some of the Parker family at Youngaleena have opted to identify with Nyiyaparli while others are Banyjima.⁷ Similarly, with Bonny Tucker's sons and daughters who have a Banyjima father.

2.5 Place of birth

As indicated above, place of birth has less influence since the movement and intermarriage of language groups around the Pilbara. Most babies are now born in hospitals outside the claim area. Those born away from their country can be Nyiyaparli if they have ancestral connection to the language and country, while being born in Nyiyaparli country does not necessarily make a person Nyiyaparli if they lack the ancestral connection. Nyiyaparli give the example of babies which are born in hospitals, where obviously this does not give people rights in the country on which the hospital is built. On the other hand, many Nyiyaparli are born away from their country and this does not appear to lessen their rights to identify as Nyiyaparli.

Susie Yuline tells how her great granddaughter's conception spirit came from Weeli Wolli, in the claim area. Susie's granddaughter went there to make a video with Curtin University: 'When we came back, that little spirit came all the way to the 12 Mile [Hedland Community]. The spirit went to Alma Gray crying, "I'm looking for my mummy." Alma said, "You go to

⁶ Nyiyaparli field notes p.29.

⁷ Nyiyaparli field notes p.26.

that camp.” She a witness – every baby got a witness. A [conception] spirit can go a long way to find the right person... it still happens.’⁸

2.6 Conception totem

Susie and other’s connection to their country also comes from distinguishing bodily features. Gordon is a kangaroo because he has a mark where the kangaroo was shot at his conception. Susie was a fish caught by her uncle, indicated by a small ear lobe, where the fish was hooked.

2.7 ‘Reared up’ and/or adopted

Donald Norman, aka Piniingu, from Nullagine was ‘reared up’ by Nyiyaparli and became a famous creator of ‘about 500 [tabi] songs all of which he remembers’ (Brandenstein 1974:72). Being ‘reared up’ amongst Nyiyaparli gave him a great knowledge but did not necessarily make him a Nyiyaparli and he has no descendants who claim to Nyiyaparli. I know of no present case where someone ‘reared up’ by Nyiyaparli is claiming membership. In some cases, children may be adopted and reared up as Nyiyaparli. Richard Yuline’s son, Peter, was adopted as ‘one side Kariyarra and one side Nyiyaparli.’ The boy’s father did not claim him back and he remains a member of the family and has the choice of being Nyiyaparli.

2.8 Knowing your country

Nyiyaparli people travel extensively in the community bus at law time. Gordon played an important role at the Bellary ceremonies, at the invitation of an Innawonga elder. The Nyiyaparli community bus took a group to the opening of the Youngaleena law ground in November 2002 and Gordon returned for the final ceremonies a month later. These visits are reciprocated and exchanges strengthen ties between groups. As Susie said: ‘My son was initiated at Youngaleena and [a Youngaleena elder] sent his son to my husband. We swap my son with them.’ However, there are markers of different ways of doing things. ‘[Banyjima] brothers and sisters stand with the stick behind their head. Well Nyiyaparli don’t do that,’ Susie claims.

⁸ W B Day Nyiyaparli fieldnotes p.49.

Appendix 2

Extract from *THE COFFIN FAMILY OF REDCLIFFS STATION, PILBARA, WESTERN AUSTRALIA*.

by Dr Bill Day

2005

In the 1890s, Maggie Mardjuwiya and a Nyamal man named George Mackay were employed by the Mackay brothers on Mundabullangana Station. Some time before the birth of their first son the couple were relocated inland to the Mackay property at Roy Hill. Maggie and George's son, Gordon Mackay, was born on the station in about 1899 and his brother Roy Mackay in about 1900.⁹ Both became acknowledged cultural leaders within the Nyiyaparli tribe. George Mackay died in 1927. Maggie's second partner was a 'half-caste' teamster named Billy Coffin who drove teams of seventeen horses from Port Hedland and Roebourne to Roy Hill carting goods for the Mackay brothers.¹⁰

On June 12, 1903, Maggie gave birth to a son at Roy Hill Station. The boy was named William Coffin, after his father. Later the station owner, John Shaw Mackay, became the father of Maggie's youngest son who she named Alec Mackay. At his mother's wishes, young William grew up with the Mackays as an insurance against his removal by the Department of Native Affairs.

The *Aborigines Act 1905* had prohibited interracial marriage without permission and made the Chief Protector the legal guardian of all Aboriginal children under the age of sixteen with the power to forcibly remove children from their parents if he deemed fit. Furthermore, the Act gave the Chief Protector the power to oversee and control the property of Aboriginal people in Western Australia.¹¹

Maggie was a very strong willed woman. William described how she could fight. 'Once she start she'd have three or four laying down flat on the ground; she'd beat anyone walking around.'¹² In a 1978 interview William was asked by Ronda Jamieson: 'How did you find the Mackay brothers that you worked for when you were young?' William replied:

Oh well, they were sort of friend up with all my people. In fact one of the Mackays, the boss, lived with my mother ... eventually he got his own wife, a white girl. They still got on alright, the white woman and my mother got on together good (page 76).

William left Roy Hill Station in 1921 when he was about eighteen to help on his father's 20,000 acre Redcliffs station, near Woodstock and Abydos where Redmont railway siding is today.

Meanwhile, Billy was living with an Injibandi woman named Ivy Sandiford.

When William left Roy Hill, his half brothers and sisters were Jack (1915), Ada (1916), Clara (1920) and Albert (1921). Later Gordon (1927) and Allan (1929) were born.

Many years later, William Coffin was asked about his years at Redcliffs. He said:

⁹ See Norman Tindale 1953, page 72. Brandenstein says Gordon Mackay 'is the most sophisticated of all song makers known to me in the Pilbara, and he went to a good school in Perth in his youth ... Njijapali is his main language.' (C G von Brandenstein and A P Thomas 1974 *Taruru: Aboriginal song poetry from the Pilbara*, page 65.

¹⁰ *An Interview with William Coffin*, July 1978, page 12.

¹¹ Department of Indigenous Affairs, *Lost Lands Report*, 2003, page 14.

Got on alright too, we got some cattle, big sixty pound bullocks, sold them, but the poor old fella died. He never left anything for us, to us... Course the country was all hills you know. All you had to do was run a little bit of a fence across, we got a paddock. And not long we get a paddock when I got there, yes. Good that way. It's still there, now nobody owns it now. ...Yes, he was gathering up wild cattle too, here and there you know. It would have went ahead, that place, 'cos it cost nothing. But the old devil he never made a will out in writing to me, you see, or anyone in the other family, his wife and that. She was standing there with nothing in her hand, couldn't claim anything. And this Bray, the welfare bloke, he claimed everything.¹²

William's half brother, Jack, recorded his memories of Redcliffs with Louis Warren in 1996. Jack said:

I was born on Roy Hill and my parents left when I was small. My father took up a bit of land to do some prospecting down here. Prospecting was new to him, he had worked on the stations doing stock work, fencing and well sinking and that sort of thing. Years ago they used only wooden posts for fencing and my father knew the timber that would stand up to all sorts of things. Blackheart was a good one. And there was Bloodwood and there was a yam tree, but they were hard to get. The lease was about 20,000 acres and there was nothing on it, so we built some holding paddocks for when we did some branding. We called the place Redcliffe [sic], but it's known as Redmont, now. I think that was in the early 1920's. There wasn't a lot of wild cattle around. My father always said if there was no ant hills around, then the land would be pretty good. Clear of pests or something I suppose. He thought the country would be better for the stock. He sank a well for water and we didn't have to go too far down. There were some springs around about, too. Tyler Springs we used a lot and another one was only a small spring. It was south west of where we were. Further up from Tyler Springs. I think. I only ever saw it dry up once. I only ever heard it called an Aboriginal name. All the creeks ran up there. There was one we called Cadjebut Creek and another at Redmont. The junction was just above Redmont and they all emptied into the springs. But a lot of wild cattle moved in after we left and trampled everything down. There was always water in the springs when we were there, even all through the 1925 drought.

William's mother, Maggie, would sometimes visit Redcliffs from Roy Hill, where she was a musterer's cook. It was a great achievement for an Aboriginal man, a 'half-caste' as he was then known, to acquire a station and to stock the land. According to the *Lost Lands Report*:

Unable to obtain bank loans, the only way Aboriginal farmers could finance [their improvements] was to work for others. This would often take them away for a season at a time placing themselves at risk of being accused of having abandoned their farm.

On the morning of July 18, 1929, Billy Coffin was employed fencing for Draper and Sons of Woodstock Pastoral Company fifteen miles from Woodstock Station when he died suddenly. The following story, taken from released Government files, tells of the hardships the family faced after the death of Billy Coffin.

Jack Coffin remembers:

¹² *An Interview with William Coffin*, July 1978, page 76.

When I was a young boy I moved around with my father doing different jobs. When he died we couldn't keep the station. My half brother, (from a different mother), William (Bill), Amy's father, tried to work the station but was too inexperienced in the station life and couldn't manage it. He wasn't very old, but already had a few kids. Amy was born at Redcliffe[s]. I don't think Native Welfare helped very much. We didn't get much from them at all in those days. So the station closed. The family went out working the alluvial gold then.¹³

In January the next year, Frank Leeds, the rationing officer at neighbouring Abydos Station, reported that Billy's son, William, had sold forty-one head of cattle from Redcliffs. Leeds continued: 'Up to the present all rates and taxes have been paid and stores to keep them going to about May. I still have forty pounds to their credit here.' Leeds suggested to the Chief Protector of Aborigines:

...they would be better left alone thus saving your department any expense as they are perfectly happy and contented ... Things are very dry about the district and we all are waiting for rain to fall, also to see wool prices go up.

Meanwhile, in the economic depression of the period, creditors were becoming concerned. Ah Tow, Draper and General Shopkeeper of Port Hedland wrote to William Coffin on January 4, 1930, 'I hear that you are winding up your father's estate' and enclosed an account of 12/1/6d that 'has been outstanding for some considerable time.' The Chief Protector of Aborigines wanted to know 'if the stores forwarded by Ah Tow have included liquor at any time.' He wrote in May, 1930: 'the matter of the administration of the estates of all deceased natives, aborigines and half castes is now entirely in my hands by direction of the Governor...' Apparently William was tiring of government paternalism, because he posted a brief handwritten letter to the Department of Native Affairs from 'Red Cliffs' on May 30, 1930, stating simply, 'I am writing to ask you to let me off this blacks act.'

On May 27, 1930, the Inspector of Aborigines for the district reported:

In my opinion, Willie Coffin is making a noble unselfish attempt to carry the burden his father laid down when he died ... also the Estate should relieve him of the handicap of debt in consideration of the benefits the beneficiaries are receiving from his personal efforts.

In his report, the Inspector informed the Chief Protector:

There are 5 to 7 steers running on Redcliff, which could be sold now, profitably, beef in good demand the weather is cool, but it must be done now. Later the weather will be too warm to move them. These steers will not improve to any appreciable intent by keeping them.

When they were visited by the Inspector of Aborigines in May the Coffin family were reported to have about 25 cows and some horses at Redcliffs 'all in excellent condition and are quiet.' The Inspector reported:

¹³ Interview with Jack Coffin by Louis Warren
16th July 1999 at Jack and Elsie's house Kingsmill Street Port Hedland.

Willie Coffin, the eldest son ... is employed at White Springs, paid two pounds a week and keep for all – good worker, useful; his younger brother Jack is also at White Springs and is doing well. The mother and family are living in the bush, removed from traffic, near their own place; ... the latter is a holding of Billie Coffin (deceased) ... H/c Willie Clifton is ...looking after Mrs Coffin and family, Willie Coffin agrees to this. Clifton claims cousinship to deceased Coffin ... they intend to go on kangarooing, and should be perfectly safe and quite happy, living out of harm's way on their little holding; with own cows to supply milk and butter. These poor people are living in dread of being taken away to a strange land.

Willie Coffin is half brother to Aleck McKay, but has no interest in Euro Springs, he visited there because the mother of both, Maggie, F.B.F.,¹⁴ goes to Euro [springs] to look after Aleck McKay. I saw Maggie who is now at Roy Hill waiting for Aleck's return from droving, when he and she will return to Euro. Recommend that they be allowed to remain at Redcliff, their own holding...

In July, 1930, the Under Secretary for Lands advised that the lease was paid to 30th June and an amount of four pounds as half yearly rental was due. The Chief Protector replied that the estate was now in the hands of the Curator of Intestate Estates 'and this Department is no therefore longer concerned in the matter.'

When the Curator assumed control of the file, a more inflexible attitude was apparent. The Curator wrote to the Chief Protector, 'Apparently your notifications that administration of all estates of deceased natives and half-castes [are] entirely in your hands have created difficulties... Monies belonging to the deceased cannot be used in this way...'

The Curator was referring to understandings given to local pastoralists. For example, in August 1930 Mr R. Draper of Woodstock Pastoral Company wrote that William Coffin had been mistakenly issued with seven pounds worth of rations after he had already been paid for a contract for five miles of fencing. Draper claimed:

Mr Mitchell has led me to believe that the department will settle this native's debts... His idea was that if this native was relieved of his own debts not the estates' he would be able to support his mother and her family but that it was not possible for him to carry on unless relieved of his liabilities. If you look at the account enclosed in my letter of 25th June, you will observe that the account was for foodstuffs.

Similarly, on November 24th the Curator of Intestate Estates replied to Frank Leeds regarding the forty-one head of cattle which had been sold in December 1929:

Your statement refers to transactions some considerable time after [Billy Coffin's] death and for which his estate is not in any way responsible ... failure on your part to remit [the proceeds of the sale] will result in my having to take proceedings for its recovery. This is regretted but unfortunately any goods, etc, supplied by you since the date of death can not be set off against the proceeds of the 41 cattle. No authority was given by me to do this and no other person is legally entitled to do so.

¹⁴Full Blood Female.

Native Affairs also wrote that Leeds must now repay the money and threatened to take legal action against him. On November 29, 1930, Frank Leeds replied that he was only trying to help the Coffins and was practically insolvent himself since Abydos had debts of over thirteen thousand pounds. Leeds added, 'I had nothing whatever to do with them selling the cattle or delivering them and I only acted as a kind of bank and they got the money as they wanted from me to pay their debts ... Being a Rationing Officer I thought I would be doing right.'

The widow and her oldest son were continually frustrated in their attempts to keep the station solvent. Ivy wrote to Mr A. O. Neville in May 1931:

Dear Sir,

I have heard that you making inquiries re my whereabouts - at the present time I am at the Old Shaw tin field via Marble Bar, before coming here I was at the Western Shaw goldfields for 7 or 8 months.

Re my husband's property: Would you kindly let me know how I stand in the matter. I have a buyer for the cattle on the place but do not know what to do and if the cattle are left any longer they will be too wild to handle and also I may not get another chance to sell. I have heard that you wrote to me some time ago but I have not received any letters at all in connection with my husband's affairs.

Mrs W Coffin

Appendix 3

Table from Day (2010:16):

Day (2010:16) cites two ethnographic sites registered with the Department of Indigenous Affairs (DIA) in the Roy Hill Station area. They are Roy Hill Station (ID 9493) and Djiwirdi (ID 11802).

Site ID	Status	Access	Restriction	Site Name	Site Type
9493	P	C	N	Roy Hill Station	Repository / cache, artefacts / scatter
11802	P	C	N	Djiwirdi	Ceremonial, Mythological

Appendix 4

From the diary of James McWhinney – Telegraph Linesman, Marble Bar, 1919-20 held by the Battye Library, Perth, WA.

(see also McKenzie, John A. 1978 'An Exile in Marble Bar: the Diary of a Telegraph Linesman 1919-20' *Early Days Journal* Vol VIII Part II, pp. 5-30. The Royal Western Australian Historical Society (inc).

After leaving the [Ethel Creek] race course, we passed a hill about a mile off the road. This hill is called "Battle Hill". I made a few inquiries about Battle Hill and was told that years ago, a man named MacKay, known as "Buller" MacKay, I don't know what profession he followed, but I gather he came to these parts in the early days as a settler, and in those days the blacks were wild, and not very friendly with the whites, and they followed this MacKay for several days and at last he found, that it was no use trying to get away without a fight, as the blacks were closing in on them, they fought the blacks on this hill, the blacks won the

fight, MacKay got away, And the chief of the tribe reckoned he owned that part of the country afterwards. And the hill has been known as Battle Hill ever since. But a peculiar coincidence happened in this case, on driving along we came to a motor car, they had been on the road all night, and were half drunk, and covered in dust and dirt, the owner of the car a Mr Lindross, was repairing a punctured tube, and in the car as a passenger was the son of this "Buller MacKay" named "Roy MacKay". He is a big fat man of middle age now. I felt like asking him some questions about the "father" but his condition was not quite normal, so I was content with the few inquiries I had already made. We arrived back in Roy Hill. Then on to Bonnie Downs, and into Nullagine, again on Sunday morning. Left for Marble Bar on Monday, about midday, we came the rest of the journey by easy stages as the camels were getting weary, and arrived in Marble Bar on Thursday morning at 9 o'clock 1st May 1919.
End of Chapter No. 5.

Note Donald MacKay was known as "Bunga" which means "Big Stomach" He was born in 1833 in Scotland and died on 24th December 1901. This is similar to "Buller" as in the diary. His son to Marion McLeod was John Shaw Mackay of Roy Hill born in 1874 and died on 12th August 1916. John Shaw Mackay had a son Alec Mackay to an Aboriginal woman named Maggie. Maggie was also the mother of Roy and Gordon who were also called Mackay. If Roy was born on 22 June 1900 he would not be 'middle aged' in 1919 as the diary says. Maggie had another son William to Bill Coffin who died in 1829. So Alec, Roy, Gordon and William were brothers.

