

Rare Aboriginal Insights

A review of *Bunji* by Bill Day, Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994, pp 157

By Ken Ralph

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There are many books available which will give you the history of Aboriginal land rights. *Bunji* by Bill Day, however, gives a rare and detailed insight into one community's struggle, that of the Larrakia people, the traditional owners of Darwin.

Bunji is the name of the newsletter which was produced by Bill Day from 1971 to 1983. Bill, a non-Aboriginal, saw the need for Aboriginal opinions and demands to be put into print. His aim was to inform the wider community of Aboriginal needs and to keep Aboriginals up-to-date on local and national issues.

The Larrakia were especially unfortunate in being claimants to land adjacent to an expanding city. The opposition to their claims was intense. They were not asking for land in the desert or in isolated wilderness but part of the outskirts of Darwin. There was conflict and confrontation with police, developers, public servants, racists and even the military who used land sacred to the Larrakia for barracks and a bombing range. Bill Day covers it all, the protests, sit-ins, arrests and even firebombs.

It would be easy to criticise the lack of attention to the legal and political issues but it must be remembered that the book attempts to present an Aboriginal perspective (even though written by a non-Aboriginal). The land is sacred to the Larrakia and to them the return of their ancient lands is a matter of justice. The Larrakia experienced a great deal of frustration from the delays in processing their land claims. The political and legal imperatives were not understood.

Bill Day includes many extracts from *Bunji* and this gives a reality to the telling and a credibility to the characters. Each significant event has its coverage in an issue of *Bunji* with its simple language and clear message. The descriptions of the camps of the various groups and the insights into life is worth the reading. The characters are real and you come to understand their struggle – the struggle for beaches, mud flats and mangrove swamps. You can feel the anger when the land is torn up for canals and cleared for subdivisions and used as a dump by the nearby city.

The Larrakia struggle is topical because it shows how people living close to cities have difficulty in using land rights legislation. The legislation is usually operative for unused crown land and such land is scarce around cities. Stringent cultural criteria are also applied to groups and individuals and you need go no further than the High Court's definition of Aboriginal in the Mabo case to see how many groups can be excluded. The current debate concerning the establishment of an Aboriginal Land Acquisition Fund is critical as it is the only proposal at present which would allow Aboriginals in cities to acquire significant amounts of land.

The book is easy reading even though at times the flow from one set of facts to another seems disjointed. However, this does not affect the overall cohesion of the story. Some of the action taken could be seen as extremist. The plan to take and hide the picture of the Black Madonna from Darwin's Catholic Cathedral and, of course, the firebombing of the developer's truck, are examples. It should be remembered

however that the Aboriginal situation was critical and perhaps desperate measures were necessary when friends were few and support limited.

Bill Day's story gives life and meaning to what for a long time has been just a few lines in other works. He gives us the characters and the world in which they lived and we come to appreciate the Larrakia struggle, a struggle repeated in many other parts of Australia. The Larrakia were fortunate to have a friend and supporter like Bill Day.

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