

Run out of town.

Not just the story of how the Larrakia people have been thwarted in their land rights claims, but also of how one man's passionate involvement led to his being virtually run out of town.

Review by Chips Mackinolty, *Australian Book Review*, August 1994, No.163, pages.37 & 60

Bill Day *Bunji: A Story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement* Aboriginal Studies Press. \$19.95pb

Two days before last June's Northern Territory elections, a group purporting to represent the Larrakia people – the traditional owners of what is now the city of Darwin – announced a Mabo-style land claim over Darwin. On the surface it looked like a set-up but the Incumbent Country Liberal Party (CLP) whose dirty tricks department has successfully played on suburban electoral fears over land rights at every election since self-government in 1978. For years the spectre of land claims in and around Darwin has been raised as a rallying cry for the whitefellas clinging to the edge of Australia's northern coastline.

At one stage the CLP expanded the perimeter of Darwin's town boundaries to an area larger than Greater London in an attempt to thwart the Kenbi Land Claim over Cox Peninsula across the harbour from the city. As has been the case with most Northern Territory Government litigation designed to stem the tide of Aboriginal demands for land justice, the town boundary scam failed in the courts. Another chapter in what has become an obsessive history for Darwin: the dispossession of the Larrakia and their struggles to get some of their land back.

Internal government documents that have surfaced since the election suggest the CLP spin doctors had no prior knowledge of the election eve land claim: the uncharacteristic ineptness of their response at the time indicates unusual innocence in the deceitful game of politics. In any case, the would-be claimants have since been repudiated by the Larrakia and the Northern Land Council. Whether the announcement of the claim influenced the election result is difficult to gauge, but the event certainly qualifies for inclusion in the obsessive history of the Larrakia and it is the obsessive nature of this history that drove Bill Day to the point of madness over thirteen years as he joined with the struggle of the Larrakia.

The old litany of the Top End has it that Territorians fall into one of three categories: mercenaries, missionaries and misfits. From his own account, and that of the many in Darwin who remember him, Bill Day was a misfit, from the days he first arrived in town as a hippy and part-time worker on the wharves. He was certainly no mercenary – he was virtually run out of town with little but the files of the *Bunji* newsletter to show for his time in the north. While the redneck line says that whitefellas who work with blackfellas are more modern-day missionaries manipulating Aboriginal [people], Bill Day's zeal was more complicated. It was borne of the converted, not the converter – if anything Day was missionised by the Larrakia in their fight for social justice rather than the other way round.

Bunji, which Day edited between 1971 and 1983, is one of the most important, if somewhat idiosyncratic, histories of Aboriginal people in contemporary times. Starting from wax stencils mimeographs, the 64 issues of *Bunji* chart the radicalisation of Aboriginal politics thousands of kilometres from better publicised events such as the Tent Embassy.

The Larrakia, like the Arrente in Alice Springs, have seen large towns grow up in the midst of their traditional country – all within living memory. In many senses, the 'frontier' Henry Reynolds wrote about ten years ago still exists in places like the Territory, though now the battles are fought with lawyers in the courts and with politicians in Canberra rather than with rifles, spears and poisoned flour.

But when the Larrakia began to take to the streets over twenty years ago, frontier violence was never far from the surface and the bravery of those such as Bobby Secretary and Fred Fogarty cannot be underestimated. This was before the Whitlam Government and the winds of change it brought; it was the time, too, when hysterical conservative politicians were accusing the new class of 'white advisers' of running guns into Arnhem Land.

In the midst of this the Larrakia stood up publically [sic] and were counted for the first time in generations as the traditional owners of Darwin. They were joined by people from other Aboriginal groups in the Northern Territory, many of whom were later to become prominent in the Northern Land Council; support was received from a growing number of Aboriginal activists elsewhere in the country. The natives were getting restless.

Bunji, the newsletter, chronicles much of this period, but Day's eponymous autobiographical account of the times does much more. In a sense, Day's almost stream-of-consciousness linking of extracts from the newsletter evokes the obsessive madness of a period of political history far better than a formal academic piece ever could. If it had been illustrated by Ralph Steadman it could easily have been called 'Fear and Loathing in Darwin'.

It was this obsessive madness that drove Day from town, reviled by the establishment, repudiated by younger Larrakia and abandoned by many friends. The same obsessive madness that has meant that the Larrakia have been opposed by the Northern Territory Government in their land claims. With the exception of the Kulaluk lease won by Bobby Secretary, the Larrakia have been thwarted at every turn, and are still waiting to be able to have the Kenbi Land Claim properly heard.

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[Note: The Kenbi Land Claim was finally heard by Aboriginal Land Commissioner, Mr Justice Gray, who ruled in favour of a section of the Larrakia, the Tommy Lyons Group, in 2000. Bill Day graduated from the University of Western Australia in 2001 with a PhD in anthropology].