

Larrakia Petition Exhibition NT Library September to November 2014
A Commentary
Rob Inder-Smith
October, 2014

Chants of 'land rights now', and, 'we want Margaret', resounded outside Darwin's Government House more than 40 years ago, as 150 Aboriginals demanded the Queen's visiting envoy accept one of modern history's longest petitions.

Princess Margaret and her husband Lord Snowdon were in pre-cyclone Darwin and a phalanx of predominantly black protesters wanted the Princess to take the document back to Buckingham Palace.

At more than three metres long and nudging a metre wide, it bore the signatures of 1000 Aborigines from all over Australia – many signators left only their inked thumb prints – and was rolled up ready for hand-over.

Black power was on the rise and the Indigenous were awakening in growing numbers to their rights to the land their ancestors occupied well before the arrival of Europeans, and then fought to defend against them.

Before Darwin, there was the Larrakia tribe and as ruler of the Commonwealth, Queen Elizabeth II was the one they most wanted to formally notify.

So far, on this fateful October day, in 1972, there had been almost total disinterest in the huge document consisting of many identically worded petitions glued and taped together as one.

A note was handed to a Royal aide to give to the Princess.

But there was no response.

Lord Snowdon had at one stage approached the crowd. But before he could engage with any of them, was led away by NT administrator, Fred Chaney snr.

Even less interest had been shown the night before in a spirited rally outside the *other* Government House: a flood-lit tin shed erected over the road and christened the 'Aboriginal Government House'. Calls had gone out for the tribes to bring their swags, didgeridoos and guitars, and they did.

While a garden party was being hosted inside, outside, mobs of blacks bussed in from the suburbs by local trade unionist Brian Manning joined the growing throng to pep up the rally, settle in for the night and embolden their countrymen and women.

Speeches were delivered through a megaphone.

But with press deadlines gone, the event went entirely unreported in the next day's national media.

Now, with the royal cavalcade pulling out of the driveway bound for the airport, rally organisers knew their chances of handing over their priceless artifact were rapidly diminishing.

An act of desperation was needed and one of the handful of white fellas there that day knew it. As passionate as the blacks he and his fellow balanda were supporting, he tucked the scroll under his arm and, mindful of the heavy police presence, searched quickly for a stout-hearted volunteer to run the gauntlet and deliver it to the leading car.

The man he found was a tough young stockman named Johnny Maler, who took the scroll and barged his way into the filth.

But he was wrestled to the ground and in the ensuing struggle, the petition was torn badly.

Cavalcade gone, the protesters dispersed and spent the next few days repairing it. The same man who coaxed Maler to rush the cops, a former primary schoolteacher from Western Australia, wrote a one-page letter in biro that began, 'Your Majesty, please accept this petition signed by 1000 Aboriginal people of Australia'.

The letter is part of the exhibition and concludes with an apology for the condition it was in and a brief explanation that the damage was sustained in a 'scuffle with police'.

It was sealed in an airmail envelope, addressed to Queen Elizabeth II and, with the scroll itself, posted to Buckingham Palace.

While there, it was read, stamped and early the following year, posted back to Australia, via the Canberra office of Governor-General Sir Paul Hasluck.

From there it went to the newly installed Department of Aboriginal Affairs before continuing on to its final resting place a short drive away, the National Archives of Australia, where the two documents have been stored since 1975.

In 2011, to mark National Reconciliation Week, the Larrakia Petition was displayed publicly for the first time, the NAA honoring it as the single most representative document of the land rights era.

Inside the upstairs gallery of the NT Parliamentary Library is an unfurled digitalised copy: the masterful centerpiece of a modest exhibition that will remain in place until the middle of next month.

It's not the first time a replica has come to Darwin.

On Remembrance Day, 2013, a copy was displayed in the Chan Gallery.

As a multi-media time capsule that includes iconic photos and a half-hour film of stills and black-power footage, the display resurrects the long, gritty struggle and brings it all storming back to life.

Curatrix, heritage co-ordinator Samantha Wells, wrote narratives and contributed something of great import herself - a metre-square wooden kick-arse protest sign that had been used as a floorboard by its owner, the late great Fred Fogarty, who would be anointed as the forgotten hero of the local campaign.

Fogarty never lived to explain to Ms Wells why he should turn his formidably worded black-activist treasure into lino-covered flooring. He died mysteriously at Kulaluk, in March, 1985, and she later stumbled upon the sign among the ruins of his demolished house.

(In 1994, Ms Wells wrote 120-page academic history of the Kulaluk town camp.)

Among many striking photos accompanying the collection is one that recalls the famous shot of triumph in war - the 1945 Iwo Jima flag-lift. Taken at Fort Hill mine in 1973, it shows four Aborigines standing atop a pile of iron ore, with an unfurled banner that reads, 'Gwalwa Daraniki', meaning 'Our land'.

The original Larrakia Petition was the work of many but the inspiration of one white fella – the ex-schoolteacher who recognised the urgent need for an act of desperation 42 years ago.

The same man produced and edited the exhibition's DVD presentation.

He is Perth-based consulting anthropologist Bill Day.

Then, he was a wanderlust-indulging fourth-generation hippie-trail Aussie, who had already seen and done a lot for a 30-year-old. In the tropics, he integrated with the Larrakia and latched on to their struggles like a barnacle to a ship.

After the notion of land rights evolved as a dream in the 1960s, Day was there when it reached a heady crescendo with the election of the Whitlam Labor Government and two Woodward reports, which underpinned the Larrakia's cause and safeguarded their heartland, Kulaluk, albeit temporarily.

But with two countrymen, Jack Phillips and Brian Manning (deceased), he rode the wave that was rejuvenating a people whose culture would soon prove to be the oldest surviving on earth.

Just as surely proved, is how firmly entrenched Day's heart was with those he helped galvanise. He fought for them and with them and to them gave a published voice in his controversial weekly news sheet, 'Bunji', after the Yolŋu term for comrade. Many issues are included in the exhibition, replete with their simple but provocative sketches.

He did not make the dash to the Princess's car four decades ago.

But like the brave black stockman Johnny Maler, he was a desperate man and still is for the exact same reason – he fights to keep Kulaluk in (genuine) Larrakia hands. His acts of desperation manifest in his prodigious documentation and Youtubing of film clips of the little-known history that almost he alone is privy to, mainly because all his black comrades have passed on, leaving him as one of the few people who lived among them to chronicle their story and define the zeitgeist.

His own struggle persists because of shonky local politics, and because Darwin's urbanised Aborigines are much more difficult to militate than they were in the 70s and 80s.

His efforts then and since have been Homeric and the exhibition cannot be seen in isolation from them.

But even he would say the momentum has stalled.

Governments are prostituting themselves to mining and farming interests, and worse, are allowing the repeated desecration of known Aboriginal burial sites – Darwin's casino at

Mindil Beach, the Wattle Creek windfarm, in South Australia, and the Rottnest Island resort, in Western Australia, to name but a few.

Against this backdrop, however, one truth towers over all else.

It is that the human spirit is like the ship's barnacle, and people united can achieve the unimaginable.

As long as the Larrakia Petition continues to survive, that might as well be carved in stone.