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A PERSONAL
HISTORY
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By way of introduction to this talk I thought I would first describe what is in fact Arnhem Land and trace some of the more noteworthy events involving it up until the commencement of World War II. Arnhem Land was so named by Matthew Flinders during his circumnavigation of Australia in the early 1800s after a vessel of the Dutch East India Company which, together with another vessel, the *Pera*, in 1623 was blown off course and touched and mapped land near what is now known as Gove Peninsula. The vessels were attempting to establish the existence of a strait between New Holland and New Guinea. The *Arnheim* was under the captaincy of Miliszoom, although William Van Coolstcrat also seems to have shared that role. Whilst in those waters Flinders also met with a Macassan prau near an island which he named Pobasso after the captain of that vessel.

The area named Arnhem Land by Flinders was in fact all that part of Australia north of a line extending from the mouth of the Fitzmaurice River in the west to the mouth of the Roper River in the east. In fact, both Darwin and Katherine are in the Arnhem Land as named by Flinders. Early milestones in its history following European settlement were:

1827 — a settlement established at Raffles Bay by Captain Bremmer and which was abandoned in 1829.

1838 — Victoria Settlement established at Port Essington and which, in turn, was abandoned in 1849.

1845 — the arrival at Victoria Settlement of explorer Ludwig Leichhardt.

1883 — the exploration of eastern Arnhem Land by surveyor David Lindsay who journeyed from Katherine, then down the Roper to its mouth, then north to the Koolatong River, then west to the Liverpool River and then back to Katherine. A truly remarkable feat.

1885 — the establishment by J A McCartney of Florida Station, an area of 5 000 square miles¹, south of Glyde Inlet. This was as a direct result of the high praise of that country given by Lindsay in his report. Florida Station was abandoned in 1893.

1903 — a second pastoral attempt with the establishment of Arafura Station over a leased area of 19 250 square miles² by the Eastern and Africa Cold Storage and Supply Co Ltd. It virtually covered the whole of eastern Arnhem Land south to the Wilton and Roper Rivers. This too was abandoned in 1908, the main reasons being an inability to control herds over such a large area together with the constant harassment of stock and personnel by the Aboriginals. Having visited the site of the homestead I would think that the plagues of mosquitoes would also have played a part in the decision to vacate.

1920 — the proclamation of the first Aboriginal Reserve around Oenpelli Mission as an attempt to control the contact between the Aboriginals and the European buffalo shooters. By this time, missions had also been established at Roper River and Groote Eylandt (Church Missionary Society) and Goulburn Island and Milingimbi (Methodist).

1931 — as a result of representations made by mission bodies and others, the Federal Government proclaimed all the land east of the East Alligator River and south to the Wilton and Roper Rivers to be the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve, covering an area of 34 900 square miles³.

¹ — 13 000 km²  ² — 50 000 km² approx  ³ — 80 000 km² approx
1932 — the massacre of the Japanese crew of a vessel in Caledon Bay which, together with
the subsequent police expeditions, drew Australia-wide attention to the area and
its peoples and began the aura of 'mystery' and adventure that seems to have
attached itself to the country ever since. The result is that it is only that part of the
original Arnhem Land which was proclaimed an Aboriginal Reserve in 1931 that
is today so described by writers and the public generally.

My first foray into the area was in May 1946 when, as a Cadet Patrol Officer with the Native
Affairs Branch, I was detailed to accompany Constable Henry Lullfitz of Maranboy on a horse-
back patrol to Mainoru Station the owner of which, Jack McKay, had made complaints
regarding some activities of the Remburrnga tribe. He alleged that they were damming the
rivers thereby causing the diversion of waters and the subsequent perishing of cattle. Jack
McKay, who became well-known as McKay of Mainoru as a result of the quixotic character
built up around him by journalist Douglas Lockwood, was the sole white resident of that
remote station, and I suspect his complaint was motivated in part by a desire for some other
company. We tracked the offending Aboriginals for some five days but they were always a day
ahead of us and obviously well aware of our presence and movements. Our pursuit took us into
the Reserve area north of Mainoru and whilst we saw and dismantled some examples of the
damming activities, there was not much evidence of stock loss as a result. As an exercise in cor-
recting wrong doing or bringing offenders to justice the patrol could best be described as a
pleasant failure, but as an introduction to the life that lay before me it was an invaluable and
enlightening experience.

My next incursion to Arnhem Land was to develop into the most rewarding and educational
tour of duty I was to experience as a field officer. With the cessation of hostilities the RAAF
Base on Gove Peninsula in north-east Arnhem Land was, of course, soon abandoned, and as it
was located on an Aboriginal Reserve the Federal Government decided to hand over the Base
and its residual material to the Native Affairs Branch to be dismantled and distributed to the
Aboriginal communities as the Director saw fit. Bill Harney, who should need no introduc-
tion as the famous author and raconteur, was then a Patrol Officer and was given the job of
going out to Gove and do an inventory and stocktake of the RAAF Base. By a stroke of great
good fortune, I was instructed to accompany him. We departed Darwin in October 1946 on the
MV Kuru, the government patrol vessel under Captain Fred Wells. Owing to a mishap to the
Kuru we transferred to the Methodist Mission lugger, the Aroena at Elcho Island, and on
arrival at Melville Bay on Gove Peninsula were met by the Yirrkala Mission superintendent,
the Rev Kolimeo Sukuru. We installed ourselves in what had been the Officers' Mess at the
RAAF Base and soon made the acquaintance of the leaders of the Aboriginal community
at Yirrkala.

We completed the stocktake within the three weeks that it was intended we remain at Gove, but
for reasons that were never made clear, we were left on that north-east peninsula for over five
months. However, so far as I was concerned at least, there was never a dull day and there could
not have been a better environment for my apprenticeship in the field of Aboriginal social and
religious life, for not only was I within the influence of the very considerable Harney know-
ledge, but I was spending my working days in the company of Aboriginal people in their
natural relaxed environment and was thereby almost unconsciously absorbing the funda-
dmental elements of the traditional world and its meaning. Bill, meanwhile, had begun
another book and I even spent many of my evenings attempting to develop a literary style.

However, the highlight of our 'abandonment', as Bill used to call it, was a foot patrol to the
headwaters of the Cato River to the west, in which we were joined by virtually the whole of the
Yirrkala community. For sixteen marvellous days we tramped through subtropical bush-
lands, over hills and across swollen streams — the wet season was upon us — with the people
hunting as they went and the children imitating their elders in their play. To me the whole 1946
Gove Peninsula experience was a revelation of the richness of the Aboriginal world, of the
fascinating variety of wildlife on our doorstep and particularly of the depth of understanding
and mutual respect that existed between Bill Harney and the Aboriginal people. As for myself, I established a relationship with the same people that happily has survived to this day and is one of those peaks in my career which dominate my nostalgic musings in my retirement.

Again as good fortune would have it, shortly after my return to Darwin in March 1947, a request was received from the Gaumont British film company seeking permission and advice for the making of an educational documentary film on the daily life of an Aboriginal tribe in their natural environment. As my experience with the people of NE Arnhem Land in the Cato River area was still very fresh in the head-office mind, it was decided, provided the people agreed, to recommend the Cato location for the making of the documentary. George Heath, then one of Australia's leading cinematographers, was engaged by Gaumont British to lead the party and of course, I was chosen to accompany them as the Government representative and liaison officer with the Aboriginal people. But the most interesting person in the party was Peter Finch, who in 1947 was the idol of Australian radio audiences for his brilliant portrayals of classical and other characters. We began 'shooting' at Yirrkala as a kind of 'getting to know you' exercise, and soon Peter was using his very considerable acting ability and charm to ingratiate himself with the people and particularly the elders.

The trek out to the Cato was a repetition of the happy Harney patrol earlier in the year, and the meeting up with the Wangurri clan in their clan country provided George and Peter with just the kind of subject material they were hoping for but were not really expecting to find. The film team established excellent relationships with the people with the result that the end product has little artificiality in its content, although the dubbed sound leaves a lot to be desired. The only copy in Australia of Primitive People, as the finished documentary was called, is held by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, but I am currently negotiating with them in the hope of obtaining a copy for the NT State Reference Library. The film is now a part of Territory history and it is imperative that a copy reside here in Darwin. For some years after the making of the film, I corresponded with Peter Finch and one of my treasures is a letter from him written from London where he was beginning to make a name for himself under the sponsorship of Lawrence Olivier, inquiring after the friends he made at Yirrkala and asking me to pass on his best wishes to them.

In 1948, a scientific party sponsored by the National Geographic Society descended on Arnhem Land to study Aboriginal life and the ecology of the area. Before departing the scene one of them chose to make press headlines with allegations that Aboriginal women from Oenpelli were being 'sold' to white buffalo shooters for tobacco, an item which the CMS Missionaries refused to issue. There were further allegations that the Mission was issuing calico flour bags for dress lengths. I was detailed to go out and investigate the allegations, and whilst I could find no evidence of trading of women for tobacco, the upshot of my visit was that the Mission agreed to include the items in their ration issue. As for the flour bag usage, this turned out to be merely the Aboriginals themselves salvaging what they regarded as useful good quality material which they put to personal use.

The next seven years I spent on patrol work in the Wave Hill/VRD district and other areas, and as OIC of the Native Affairs Office in Alice Springs. Accordingly, it was not until 1955 that my duties took me again into Arnhem Land. At that time, Darwin-owned pearling lugger boats were operating off the northern coast and many of them were manned by indentured Okinawans who were technically American citizens, their island still then being under American conquest. Complaints had been filtering in from the Liverpool River area that lugger crews were entering prohibited waters and seeking the favours of Aboriginal women. It was decided that Ted Egan, then a Patrol Officer, and myself should investigate these stories and in December of that year we were landed on Entrance Island in the mouth of the Liverpool River from HMAS Emu, the Navy's sole vessel then located in these waters.
The Emu steamed away and soon after canoes of Aboriginals began moving from the mainland towards our island hide-out. We were relying on this to happen, otherwise we would have been powerless to do anything about any unlawful intrusion into the estuary. As we expected, we knew some of our Aboriginal visitors who were only too happy to join us in our plan of action should any luggers enter the river. As our friends predicted, a vessel steamed into anchor early the next morning whereupon Ted and I, crouching low in a canoe, were paddled out by two Aboriginals to board the intruder. The skipper, an Okinawan, in response to our questions at first pleaded ignorance of English, but unfortunately for him he had as part of his crew a couple of Tiwis from Bathurst Island who were conversant in both the skipper's language and in English. Our interrogation through these men became unnecessary when the skipper gave his replies in broken but fluent English. We duly served the papers which we carried with us in anticipation of such an eventuality, and directed that the vessel proceed to Goulburn Island where a court would be convened to hear the charges of trespass.

Soon after, two other luggers joined the first and the same action was taken in respect of them. On the return of the Emu, the skippers of the luggers advised that they were intending to return to Darwin and would prefer that the court action be taken there, rather than at Goulburn Island. To this we agreed and with Ted and me on board, the Emu led the line-astern passage out of the estuary and returned to Darwin. The subsequent court case was a minor sensation, for, apart from the fact that this was the first time vessels had been apprehended under the terms of the Aboriginals Ordinance, the legislation provided that on conviction the court could order confiscation of the vessels and their contents. The charges were bitterly contested by the luggers' owners, but our evidence was accepted and convictions recorded. However, no confiscation orders were made, heavy fines being deemed appropriate by the presiding magistrate. I should mention here that with the establishment of Maningrida some eighteen months later this problem on the Liverpool River disappeared.

Which brings me to May 1957 when four members of staff departed Darwin for the Liverpool River and began the foundation work for what was to become Maningrida. They comprised Mr and Mrs Dave Drysdale, Ted Egan and Trevor Milliken. By this time, I was Chief Welfare Officer and the oversight of settlements and their management was my responsibility. Accordingly, later in that year, I travelled to Maningrida with 'Curley' Bell and his supply boat, and on the eve of our intended return journey a young woman was brought up to Mrs Drysdale with a newborn babe. There was a problem in that the wee child, a boy, would not suckle and his survival was in jeopardy. The Darwin doctor on being contacted by emergency radio, strongly urged that every effort be made to get mother and child to Milngimbi where the aerial ambulance could land and evacuate them to Darwin. Maningrida's airstrip was then only in the course of construction. Curley Bell unhesitatingly agreed to 'divert' to Milngimbi—a distance of at least 60 miles in the wrong direction—on his return trip, and I, the only passenger, was delegated to tend the mother through the trip by encouraging her to express milk into a pannikin and then to try and spoon the milk into the tiny mouth of the baby. Mrs Drysdale wished us Godspeed and a smooth trip as we departed Maningrida, and her stocks must have been high indeed with the Almighty for the seas that afternoon were mirror smooth all the way to Milngimbi, which we reached at midnight. The mission nursing sisters took over from me, and the mother and baby were whisked up to hospital. Curley and I anxiously awaited news as dawn approached, and just before the aerial ambulance arrived we learnt that the baby's chances of survival had improved. As the sun rose, the plane took off with its precious cargo on his way to expert medical care in Darwin. Years later I was happy to learn the name of the baby from Mrs Drysdale's book, The Last Walkabout, and at last report he was a healthy thirty-year-old and still living at Maningrida.

In the late fifties, a problem was developing at Numbulwar on the Rose River in the Southern Gulf area. The site of this mission is Nungabuyu country, but the Balamumu clan whose country is near the Walker River to the north, had moved in and were creating intertribal friction. By 1960 BHP had won some mineral exploration rights over areas in eastern Arnhem Land.

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1 — 97 km
and had pushed tracks up from Mainoru into the Reserve and, more importantly, had made a road through the Mitchell Ranges. With this major obstacle to vehicle travel removed I decided in 1960 to make a patrol in two Land Rovers into south-eastern Arnhem Land with a view to seeking possible resettlement sites for the Balamumus in their own country. We had the benefit of the BHP tracks as far as the headwaters to the Koolatong but thereafter we were on our own. However, the country was remarkably open, although crossed by innumerable creeks. Nevertheless, we penetrated well down the Koolatong and thence south to the Walker which we struck at a place known as Policeman’s Crossing — a relic of the police patrols following the Caledon Bay massacre in 1932. We located a couple of potential sites for a Balamumu outstation, but with the emergence of the Homeland Movement in the late sixties the Rose River problem resolved itself by the Balamumu moving back to their own country on their own initiative.

Between 1961 and 1963 I spent much time on the Gove Peninsula in the examination of problems associated with the proposed mining of the massive bauxite deposits in the area. Several companies were interested in this development and it was imperative that every endeavour be made to ensure that the Aboriginal people of Yirrkala fully understood the nature and effect on their land of the proposed mining. In addition, potential sites for a port, a town, a railway or conveyor belt track, an adequate water supply — all needed to be examined and discussed with the Aboriginal leaders. My role was to liaise between the companies and the community.

When the various areas required for mining, the town, the port, the water supply, etc were finally determined, action was taken by government to excise them from the Reserve, and this action gave rise to the famous ‘Bark Painting Petition’ to the Federal Parliament, which resulted in the setting up in 1963 of the Parliamentary Select Committee to investigate the grievances of the Yirrkala Aborigines. The Chairman was Roger Dean who was later to become an Administrator of the Northern Territory. Other notables on the Committee were Kim Beasley, Don Chipp, Gordon Bryant and Jock Nelson. I was required, of course, to give evidence and I also attended all hearings at Yirrkala and at Darwin.

I think it is pertinent here to give an outline of the political scene that then existed within the Yirrkala community itself. In Aboriginal terms, this community was an artificial one in that it comprised over twelve clans, only two of whom were the major landowners of the peninsula, namely the Riratjingu and the Gumaitj. The other ten or more clans were virtually living at Yirrkala by courtesy of the two landowning clans. This represented no problems until it had to be spelt out in legal terms in the petition and in subsequent action regarding land title. This affront to the pride of the other clans, particularly the Djapu, the Galpu and the Wangurri, was deeply resented and was the catalyst in the decision to be more positive and assertive in their move back to their own clan domains. These traumatic and dramatic experiences brought to public notice the stature and calibre of some of the clan leaders at Yirrkala, whom I cannot name because unfortunately they have since died.

Also in 1963 I somehow found time, in association with the Forestry Department, to break a dry season vehicle track between Oenpelli and Maningrida. A highlight of this exercise was the calibre of the advice from our Aboriginal guide — an elder from Oenpelli. His advice as to the best route, which we sought almost hourly, was almost identical to the route previously plotted by Forestry staff from aerial photographs back in Darwin. In other words, this elder had absorbed the capabilities and shortcomings of the white man’s vehicle to a very high degree. In fact, we were following the Forestry route when we struck the Gumarrdir River at a point where it has five channels. Whilst we were wracking our brains how best to make this complicated crossing, it occurred to one of us to seek the advice of our guide, who was quietly resting under a tree. Casually and with some disdain he informed us that a mere mile downstream the Gumarrdir consists of a single channel only. I do not know if that sudden right-angle turn still exists on that road at the Gumarrdir, but that is the origin of it. The crossing of the Liverpool River was made at the identical spot where David Lindsay crossed eighty years earlier in 1883. The welcome at Maningrida was noisy, exciting and rewarding, with

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1 — 1.6 km

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school children lining the road and the rest of the community welcoming in their own way the arrival of the first vehicles to travel overland.

The following year, 1964, the community at Milingimbi was seeking assistance in the establishment of an outstation on the mainland where a cattle project was being developed. The area involved was adjacent to the old Arafura homestead site. Accordingly, accompanied by officers from the Primary Industry Branch, and using the new road to Maningrida, we continued to blaze a trail eastwards across the Blyth River and eventually into the magnificent valley that was the site of the Arafura Homestead in 1903 — magnificent that is until about 5.30 pm when mosquito- es in hordes make life almost unbearable. The valley was also the site of an airstrip used by that remarkable mission ary/pilot, the Rev Harold Shepherdson. It was there that we met up with the Milingimbi representative, flown in by Sheppy. There was already a small Aboriginal community at Nangalala on the Glyde Inlet, but as a result of our 1964 visit, a larger outstation known as Ramingining was eventually established. Adjacent to the old Arafura homestead site is an extensive lagoon/swamp. and it is into this that the Goyder River flows — it does not reach the sea. Early cartographers, not being aware of this, assumed that what is now known as the Glyde Inlet and the Glyde River was in fact the mouth of the Goyder River and so marked it. As a result, a supply vessel taking goods to the Arafura Station on the Goyder River in the early 1900s sailed up what the skipper believed to be its estuary, only to discover that he was nowhere near the homestead and had no way of getting there. Confusion reigned for some time until the true effluence of the Goyder was discovered.

Further trail blazing was undertaken in 1965, this time with the army, who wished to test the capabilities of SWB Land Rovers towing fully laden trailers through trackless and difficult terrain. My vehicle took the lead and the route taken was to the old Arafura site via the tracks, where we could find them, of the previous year. I stress that the exercise was still a scrub-bashing one, for the track left by a single vehicle is barely visible after twelve months, to the point that we missed the ‘jump-down’ into the Arafura valley and finished up at Nagalala on the Glyde River. From there we pushed south to the BHP crossing of the Goyder, thence largely by the mining company’s tracks to Yirrkala. Hence we were the first vehicles to travel overland from Darwin to Gove Peninsula and accordingly the welcome at Yirrkala was memorable. The Land Rovers performed excellently and so far as I was concerned the trip was noteworthy in that throughout the journey I was served with three first-class meals a day prepared by a good cook from an army field kitchen. It was luxury indeed. I should mention that at the last minute before leaving Darwin, the newly appointed CO of Larrakeyah Barracks decided to make the trip, but wished to return by air. He accordingly arranged with the RAAF to be at Gove at midday on a certain date — such was his confidence, but whether in me or his men I’m not sure. We arrived at Gove only one hour late, after over a week of hazardous cross-country travel with six vehicles in convoy.

1965 was, however, highlighted by the survey of sacred sites over the whole of the Gove Peninsula. By this time, Swiss Aluminium had won the contest to develop the bauxite deposits and the precise site of the town and the ports and areas to be mined had been determined. It was essential therefore that places of significance to Aboriginals be identified before any construction or mining work began. It was also important that the residents of the new town be aware of such places in potential recreation spots outside the town and mining leases. In June of that year and accompanied by Patrol Officer Bill Gray, I undertook an exhaustive survey of the peninsula by sea and by land. At all times I was guided and advised by the leaders of the two landowning clans, the Gumatij and the Riratjingu, and over the weeks of the survey we identified and mapped scores of places of significance of varying degrees of importance to the people, ranging from sacred/secret to of only minor relevance. I would like to point out that over the twenty years that have elapsed during which time the mining activity has been fully developed and a sizeable town with all its social and civic infrastructure has been established, only two places of significance have been identified as not having been picked up in the survey, and neither of them is of any great ritualistic or religious importance. During the survey
we were shown a series of stone arrangements over a large area, the outlines of which depicted the material impact of the Macassan era, mainly huts, drying ovens and ships. This was apparently an attempt by one Aboriginal at about the turn of the century to record for posterity some aspects of the Macassan visitation and trade which was then disappearing from the people's lives. I described it, perhaps fancifully, as an example of the origins of writing within an otherwise illiterate culture.

At about the same time, a killing occurred at Yirrkala which was to have a profound effect on the whole community. The man who died was only of relatively minor importance in the hierarchy, even of his own clan, but he was a flamboyant personality with a kind of cult following. On occasions he would parade in an opera cloak and top hat — where he got them from is a mystery, as was much else about him. He was a member of the Galpu clan, and he was fatally stabbed by a Djapu man, who was also a Councillor, during an argument over the playing of cards, a pastime which had been banned by the Council. The Galpu and Djapu clans have traditionally been at loggerheads, and this tragedy was the catalyst for the emergence of all the bitterness of past feuds.

Two Djapu men were arrested and removed to Darwin for trial, but this only served to heighten the tension. Over a period of about two months, I was called back to Yirrkala on at least six occasions to attempt a mediation when tempers flared dangerously and during which time a Djapu leader was virtually held under house arrest by the Galpu. Ultimately, a somewhat fragile compromise was reached between the feuding groups. Meanwhile one of the Djapu men was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to a few months imprisonment. My great concern then was that on his return to Yirrkala following his discharge from gaol, the bitter clan fighting would begin anew, and I tried desperately to persuade him to spend a period at Groote Eylandt before returning to Yirrkala. However, he was determined to face up to his accusers and opponents in his own community, and it was this strong resolve that carried the day when eventually he did return, for not only was there no eruption of violence, but the man continued with his civic ambitions and is now a highly respected and influential person in the overall management of the Yirrkala community.

An interesting sidelight was observed during the troubles. Traditionally, when seeking support for the revenge of the death of a fellow clansman, men carry a piece of the deceased's hair, or of his clothing, thereby enlisting the spirit of the deceased in efforts to persuade such support. In this instance it was discovered that clansmen were carrying a photograph of the dead man for this purpose, which is an interesting anthropological phenomenon.

The Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in 1969 was the Honourable W C Wentworth, a descendant of the W C Wentworth of the Blue Mountains exploration fame. Following reports of the crossing of Arnhem Land by vehicle, he decided that he would take a ministerial party across from Mainom to Yirrkala. I was delegated to organise vehicles, fuel and food and to proceed to an airstrip near Bulman on the Wilton River to await the ministerial party's arrival by air. Until they alighted from the aircraft, I was not sure who would be in the party, and I took no particular notice when I was introduced to who I thought was a Mrs Gordon. Twenty-four hours were to elapse before I realised that I was in the company of the Prime Minister's wife, Mrs John Gorton. She was a most charming woman who did her share of work around the camp each evening, as did Mrs Barbara Wentworth. In all there were nine in the party which travelled in three vehicles on what was a fairly uneventful trek made interesting by the company.

In 1971 the Yirrkala community had been given a Federal grant to erect a Council House. Ted Egan was then the Welfare Branch representative in the area and was endeavouring to arouse enthusiasm for the labour required for foundations, etc. During a visit I was discussing progress with Ted and the Council President when I understood the latter to observe 'Those two heart attacks didn't help us very much'. I was intrigued by this but hesitated to ask who had
been the victims in case they had been fatal. It wasn't until later that I learnt that the 'two heart attacks' were in fact 'two architects'.

Also about that time at Yirrkala I was involved in one of the earliest cases of a man being charged with assault for having forcefully insisted on a girl joining him as his promised wife. The charge was laid on the insistence of the girl involved. It highlighted, of course, the inevitable clash of values between our two cultures — he was acting fully within his rights by traditional Aboriginal law, but was offending our concepts of the rights of the individual in such situations. The case aroused a wide degree of interest, and the defendant was represented by a southern lawyer. However, the assault was not denied and the magistrate found the case proven, but imposed no penalty. Incidentally, tribal law ultimately prevailed and the girl moved into the man's camp.

In 1972, I acquired for the first time copies of the Gaumont British film made in 1947. I took it out to Yirrkala, but as twenty-five years had elapsed and therefore some of those appearing had since died, I showed it first only to the elders to get their reaction before running it before the general community. Their reaction was one of wistful sorrow, followed by a request that I not show it publicly — not because of any taboo content of which there is none, but because of the sadness they felt personally on observing the living activities of persons now dead. Of course, I complied with their request.

I retired in 1976 almost thirty years after my first arrival at Melville Bay with Bill Harney. In that time I developed a strong feeling for Arnhem Land and a high regard for its people, particularly those of Yirrkala. This esteem still continues and I value the contacts I am able to make occasionally thereby maintaining a nostalgic link with a crowded, but fading past. I look back on my involvement with some pride and I trust that my humble efforts may have helped the people to face and cope with the dramatic, complex and fast-moving changes that were brought upon them over that span of years. Rarely in the history of mankind has a people, within the span of one generation, been required to make adjustments to their lifestyle which have impacted upon almost every vital element of their traditional world. The task has inevitably taken its toll and there have been some victims, but overall the people of Arnhem Land have risen to the challenge with a vitality of endeavour that will surely see them maintain the pride and dignity that has been their inheritance from their ancestral heroes.

(Talk delivered at the State Reference Library of the Northern Territory, Darwin, on 29 April 1987.)