

*Reading Coolibah's Story: As told by Coolibah to John Boulton*

**John Boulton**

**Copyright © John Boulton 2013. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged.**

**Abstract:** This paper describes selected key events in the life of Coolibah, a retired Gurindji stockman, through his non-Aboriginal friend John Boulton. Coolibah made John “a close friend of the same age”, referred to specifically as *tjimerra* in *Gooniyandi* language (the language that he has become most familiar with since being removed from his family as a small child). This classificatory kin relationship makes it possible for John Boulton to tell Coolibah’s story. This article is situated within the tradition of oral histories of the lives of Aboriginal people at the colonial frontier. It is also within a tradition of friendships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, including European, people, often anthropologists and other professionals with a deep commitment to that world. In this article, Boulton uses the events of Coolibah’s life and that of his family and kin as a departure point to discuss the impact of history on the health of the people. Coolibah’s life is viewed through the lens of structural violence whereby the causal factors for the gap in health outcomes have been laid down. This article provides the theoretical framework to understand the extent of psychic, emotional and physical harm perpetrated on generations of Aboriginal people from the violent collision of the two worlds on the Australian frontier.

**Keywords:** Australian Aboriginal, Gurindji, structural violence

**Introduction and background**

As is unfortunately well-known in Australian history, the barrier to mutual understanding between Aboriginal people and European settlers and their descendants has been almost absolute, not least from the brutal takeover of Aboriginal lands at the colonial frontier but also from the colonists’ belief that Aboriginal people were on the lowest rung of the ladder of human, let alone social, evolution. And they treated Aboriginal people accordingly.

Thus stories of friendships across this gulf of dispossession and racism have especial poignancy as they reflect the deep connectedness between all humans. Such stories are found from every region of Australia and in every epoch. One of the first being that between a traditional lawman and the British doctor in the garrison at King George’s Sound (now Albany) in Western Australia, set up early in the nineteenth century to forestall any French claims to the coast. This charming story has been immortalised in Kim Scott’s historical novel *That Deadman Dance* (2010). Similarly, Peter Sutton has developed vignettes of many deep friendships between Aboriginal and European

Australians, often instigated by Aboriginal people themselves (Sutton 2009). These friendships are of many types: between men, between women, and between the sexes as well, as in the case, for example, of female anthropologist Ursula McConnell, who is notable for her long-term friendships with Aboriginal men.

Oral histories and autobiographies of Aboriginal people who lived their lives on the frontier zone are of great importance as evidence of the socio-economic and political conditions of colonisation. These are the causal background to much of today's tragic situation with respect to the poor health status, lack of engagement in formal education and lack of economic independence for the people in remote communities. For each region of remote Australia there is an enormous body of literature, particularly for the Kimberley region, where men and women who are now in their sixties lived during a period of dramatic change. They went from being serfs on pastoral fiefs as stockmen and domestics, through the period of dislocation from the late 1960s, through the 1970s, when many were forced off their traditional lands following the Equal Wages Case.<sup>1</sup> Some now live on self-governing communities in pastoral excisions, reserves or on pastoral stations purchased through Aboriginal land grant schemes.

These stories include the first autobiography written in an Aboriginal language, *Walmajarri* by Jukuna Mona Chuguna, of her childhood in the Great Sandy Desert far to the south of Fitzroy Crossing (Bent et al. 1); and range from bush yarns and tales of derring-do by the Fitzroy Valley drovers (Marshall v); of leadership against great odds (Munro and Angajit 115); of the cruelty experienced by children brought up on remote missions (McDonald 43); of the humblest origins of the grandparents of some of today's leading Kimberley Aboriginal families and their stoicism in the face of adversity from racism (Wright 156); of the indomitable human spirit under the harsh regime of control exercised by A.O. Neville the Chief Protector of Aborigines of Western Australia, through the mid-twentieth century (Kinnane 125); to the remarkable story of a desert man returning with his non-Aboriginal wife to live in the desert (Lowe and Pike 131).

Personal story telling is discursive; a verbatim account would be unreadably prolix. There is also the question of which level of language to use. In the Kimberley there are several types of spoken English: from Standard English, to Aboriginal English, to Kimberley Kriol, and then "language". "Language" refers to the person's preferred mother tongue, but many people speak two or three languages, those of their parents and grandparents.

---

<sup>1</sup> White civil rights activists in the 1960s established the Equal Wages for Aborigines committee, based on the premise that equal pay was the basic marker of acceptance and social inclusion in Australian society. Members of this committee argued that people who were paid such a small proportion of the basic wage were not able to live like white people, as required under the assimilation policy.

In 1968 the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission ruling on equal wages in the cattle industry came into force. However, this ruling turned out, for many, to be a hollow victory: "When the case was being heard in 1966 the Commission accepted the employers' evidence that "many of them expect[ed] to change over to white labour if Aborigines are to be paid at award rates". This did happen and many Aboriginal stockmen faced unemployment for the first time. Families and whole communities were turned off properties where they had worked for generations. People drifted into towns and were given "sit down" money (unemployment benefits). They were no longer able to fulfil obligations to their country". (*Collaborating for Indigenous Rights*, <http://www.indigenoustrights.net.au/section.asp?sID=6> Accessed 23 December 2013).

Although *Pama-Nyungan* language families account for the greatest area, the majority of the twenty-eight language families in the country are non-*Pama-Nyungan* but are spoken only in a narrow geographic band from the Kimberley across the north of Australia to Arnhem Land.<sup>2</sup> There are thirty-four separate languages spoken in the Kimberley, all within twenty-five non-*Pama-Nyungan* language families, and they have greater linguistic differences than different languages on continental Europe (Mike Morwood, pers. com., March 2010).

Then there is the question of which voice to use in the telling of an oral history. Different authors have used different techniques when writing the story of their Aboriginal friend; for example Lockwood presents his friend's story in the first person in "I, the Aborigine" (p7). However, its declamatory style does not sound genuinely as the subject would have actually spoken. The historian Mary Anne Jebb discusses this issue in her biography of Morndi Munro (Munro and Angajit, p155). She presents Morndi's story through his voice but uses Standard English. This avoided the risk of condescension when a non-Aboriginal person tries to copy the conversational speech of Aboriginal English; Jebb presented his words in what Morndi called "high English", which he knew he would have spoken had he received the education he deserved.

In this account I have used the first person in an attempt to give a synopsis of many conversations, and to include Coolibah's quite specific statements of affect, for example of how sad he feels about not knowing his parents, and how angry he still feels about how he was treated. This applies not only to being treated physically harshly but also to not being given the financial legacy that he feels his adoptive family owes him since they took him away from his own family and effectively adopted him as a baby. He therefore feels that he not only lost his family connections by being taken in by the station Missus, but did not receive the benefit of education that was his due.

This paper has two aims, the first being to tell Coolibah's story as he told it to me over time. Through his story Coolibah adds to the body of oral history of the Kimberley with the clear intent that a wide audience in and beyond Australia should know his story of suffering as a child, adolescent and young man. The story emerged from many conversations that arose out of the friendship between Coolibah and me. The second aim of the paper is to situate his story within the theoretical base of structural violence as mediated by the inequity and racism, grounded in legislation, in northern Western Australia during the second half of the twentieth century. But that comes later—first, his story.

**Caveat:** To readers, an explanation of the words used to describe Aboriginal children, women, and people of mixed heritage. At the colonial frontier the sharp demarcation between Aboriginal people and others of European ancestry was emphasised by the use of terms that are now considered racist and demeaning, if not highly offensive. These include "full blood", "half-caste", and the term "gin" or "lubra" for an Aboriginal woman and "piccaninny" for a child. The Kimberley region of Australia was one of the last areas where these terms persisted and some such terms are in current use by older

---

<sup>2</sup>The name "Pama-Nyungan" is derived from the names of the two most widely separated groups, the Pama languages of the northeast and the Nyungan languages of the southwest. The words *pama* and *nyunga* mean "man" in their respective languages (Dixon 395).

Aboriginal people when describing themselves and others. However it is not acceptable for non-Aboriginal people to use them except when talking to close Aboriginal friends. In contrast the term *kartiya*<sup>3</sup> to describe a non-Aboriginal Australian, typically white, hence “whitefella”, is commonplace and acceptable.

### On first meeting Coolibah



Coolibah with one of his grandsons 2010 © John Boulton

Coolibah, the tall wiry stockman and legendary rider, his body now worn out by relentless hard physical work (for example his fingers disfigured by injuries sustained from fencing with barbed wire with no protection), and his lungs damaged by a lifetime smoking habit. And me, who from the privilege of education has enjoyed the social and intellectual benefits of a career as a child specialist, as a young academic at the cutting edge of clinical science and medical education in modern teaching hospitals, and later after retirement from the academic world having the privilege to be welcomed to Aboriginal communities as a “kids’ doctor” helping families. Truly parallel lives in different universes, yet Coolibah reached out across this gulf with the hand of friendship.

Our friendship began after the Royal Flying Doctor Service had flown Coolibah’s three-year-old grandson from Halls Creek to Derby for treatment of a serious medical

---

<sup>3</sup> Meakins writes: “*Kartiya* is the Gurindji word for ‘white people’, perhaps derived from ‘guardian’. It also may be a Gurindji word for ghost which broadened to include ‘white people’ due to their skin colour and aggressive behaviour towards Aboriginal people” (77).

condition. He looked after his little grandson with tender care, and maintained a dignified figure in the midst of the busy children's ward. When he was ready to go home to an outstation on one of the community-owned cattle stations near Halls Creek, I arranged to see the child for a check-up at the hospital on my visit to Halls Creek the following week. That day Coolibah and his grandson came in at the end of a day's clinic with the community nurse. Getting back home was more difficult for them as there was no-one in town to give a lift back to the outstation the next day.

So it came about that two days later I offered to drive Coolibah and the little boy back home. We headed west on the long drive and started talking; we soon found out that we were the same age and Coolibah responded warmly to this coincidence. I asked him what he had done as a young man and related this to where I had then been in my career. He told me about having been taken away from his family and his deep sadness at not even having a photo of his mother. I told him how shamed white people were now, by what we had been told in recent years. He replied: "John, there is no need for you to feel ashamed, but it's important that we were given the apology by that bloke Rudd".<sup>4</sup>

As we drove along the deep muddy track towards his outstation, along and across several creeks, he told me how important it was for him to have his children and grandchildren living all together and close. Soon we arrived at his house, one of just five in the outstation, and I was introduced to his adult daughters, sons, and his daughter's husband, as well as a mob of littlies. By the time it came to leave, he asked me to take a photo of us together; Coolibah looked at it and said: "That's good, us two old-timers, mates", and invited me to visit again to share more stories.

This meeting gave me much to reflect on: his resilience, his optimism and courage in the face of relentless adversity, and his ability to achieve contentment with his children and grandchildren after his wife had died. And his remarkable ability to seek affinity with someone like me who represented everything he had good reason to avoid in terms of white government authority. Thus he afforded me the extraordinary opportunity to gain a glimpse of the life of an Aboriginal man in all its profound difference.

---

<sup>4</sup> In May 1997, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission tabled a report entitled *Bringing them Home* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997). This report acknowledged that "Indigenous children have been forcibly separated from their families and communities since the very first days of the European occupation of Australia" by governments and missionaries. The children who were removed came to be known as the Stolen Generations. On 13th February 2008, the Australian Federal Government formally apologised to the Stolen Generations. The then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, apologised to Australia's Indigenous peoples, their families and communities, for laws and policies which had "inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians", and included a proposal for a policy commission to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in "life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity" (Source: *Apology Transcript*, available at: <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/wxhibition/apology/sorry.html> Accessed 23.12.2013).



Coolibah and his friend John Boulton at his outstation outside of Halls Creek WA in 2010  
© John Boulton

### **This is my story**

This is my story, as told to my *tjimerra*, my friend of the same age, John, who has written the story using my words. I gave him permission to write it; it is just the start, give it time.

My name is Coolibah, and I am a Gurindji man. I was born on Coolibah Station in the Northern Territory on 16 June 1944. I was named after the station owner whose Missus took me from my family when I was a tiny piccaninny. My first name was given to me by the boss's son, who I will call Bill [JB: *not his actual name*]. But Coolibah is my real name, and I don't like my surname [JB: *Coolibah asked me not to include it in this story*].

I never knew my father or mother, nor ever had a photograph. I did not know why I was taken from my family until last year, when I was 65 years old. So I have spent my life not knowing if I had any brothers or sisters, and wondering what happened to my parents. What I found out just last year was this; that my mother ran away. She had been treated in hospital in Katherine, and as one of the boss's brothers was driving through from Queensland he arranged to pick her up and take her back to the station, which is just past Timber Creek. The story I was told was that she jumped off the truck and ran away, and they never saw her again. The police told the boss that they had found a body a long time later and they thought it could have been her. It makes me very sad to think how badly she was treated. Why should she run away and leave me in the women's camp, just a tiny baby?

Late last year I got more information from the National Archives in Darwin. My *kartiya* mate John went up there and fossicked around, and with the help of the lady who works there, Joanne, found the report of the Native Welfare officer who had to record the names of the Aboriginal people on each station. In those days we were the property of the boss; you had to get permission if you wanted to move around, and the boss and the

local police, who had legal responsibility, would hardly ever allow it. The record for December 1943 shows my mother's name, May, and lists the names of her four children and gives their ages. She would have been pregnant with me by then, but her husband, Long Sandy, had only got back from prison in Darwin in November. It states on the record the date he returned to work, although he only got rations, tobacco, and a shirt in those days. When John went to visit the boss's widow in New South Wales last year, her son Bill, the fellow who used to beat me, told him that my father Hector and he had been mates as they were the same age and the only teenage boys on the station. Bill said they used to go kangaroo shooting together.

So Hector was my mother's sweetheart, at least when her husband was in Darwin in prison for a tribal killing. He must have been one of the Lawmen to do the spearing. Was that why my mother ran away? Was she frightened that she would get punished for having a sweetheart when her husband was in prison? I will never know.

When I was just four years old the boss moved across to the West Australia side to take up another couple of stations, Springvale and Bedford Downs. He inherited them in 1938 from his brother Paddy who had died of a burst appendix when they were at the Wyndham Races. This was the Paddy who chose his name to give to the man who became the famous artist Paddy Bedford when he was born on Bedford Downs station. [JB: *Historian Cathie Clement advises that Bedford Downs was in family ownership from 1918, with Paddy holding one third and at times working as the manager. He left his third to his brother. Springvale was not purchased until 1948*] (Clement, pers. comm., Aug 2012).

I don't have clear memories of Coolibah Station as I grew up on Springvale. The Missus grew me and other children up in the house, full-blood like me and half-caste. We had a governess, no white kids. I remember the names of the other kids, they were all younger than me, I was the first one the Missus took in. There was Gilbo McAdam, he ended up head stockman at Springvale. There was Rammell Peters, and the brothers Clancy and Ross Clifton, and three sisters Lorna Thomas, Matilda Patrick and Judy Patrick. Their father was Tommy Springvale.

I must have been a favourite of the Missus because she told a story that when the Western Australian Governor and his wife visited Halls Creek they dressed me up in a white shirt and red bow tie, and I was supposed to give her a bunch of flowers. Being a little kid I took off the shirt and pants, but could not get rid of the bow tie. So when the time came for me to give the flowers they were long gone, and I picked up a stick to give to her. The Missus said that the Governor's wife picked me up and kissed me, so I must have been a cute little kid. I only heard this story last year after John visited the Missus who was then 101 years old.

If the Missus was so fond of me, why did she not look after me properly and send me to school so I could have learned to read and write well and got a good job? So what I feel now is angry that the Missus did not grow me up properly. By the time I was a big boy, maybe 11 years old, I was sent to the stock camp. That was hard, and I was not much more than a kid really. But the half-caste children, they were sent to school to get a good education. The boss said education was a waste of money on Blacks. He was talking about us full-blood kids.

Life in the stock camp was hard. Bill used to beat me and I still hate him for that. In fact what I remember most was being beaten, and the smell of blood and urine because I pissed myself. He beat the living fucken Christ out of me. I couldn't fight back, I was too little. He hung me upside down, I was so frightened. My face was all busted up. Why was he so hard on me? Nowadays you get charged if you growl at the kids.

When I was at the camp the Native Welfare fellow came round and said he was taking me to Moola Bulla.<sup>5</sup> The older men said that I belonged to Springvale and told him to go away. Thank God I did not end up on Moola Bulla.

The white stockmen used to insult us at the end of the working day by shouting, "Now get back to your lubra". If the Aboriginal stockman answered back, he'd be sent off bush, and his wife left at the mercy of the stockmen. That's why there are so many half-castes.

At the end of the season we would drive the big mob of cattle across the ranges to Derby jetty. We used to drive them there in August, or to Wyndham in June, to the meatworks. The route we took to Derby was overland, not the route the road now goes. We would go along the valley to Tableland then across to Mount House and down the track to Derby. They put in the Beef Road in the 1960s, now it's called the Gibb River Road. The drive took three and a half weeks and when we got to Derby we were given 50 pounds. It was hard work, you could not rest.

That was around 1957 or '58, so I would have still been a teenager. Later we went only as far as Glenroy where they started a meatworks, it's between Tableland and Mount House, near where Mornington is now [*JB: this is now the Mornington Wilderness Nature Reserve*]. A DC3 plane used to fly the meat down to Derby.

Life was so hard I ran away in about 1962 when I was eighteen years old. We were at Bamboo Springs muster camp with Mick, one of the boss's sons, and a couple of jackeroos. They were all right, but one got pummelled by Mick. He had him on the ground and punched him in the face like this, real hard so his face was busted. Mick was swearing at us, so that night Ross Clifton and I left, just carried our swags. We walked 12 km and camped on top of a hill. Then in the morning when it was still dark we got up and went back to the station, to the pensioners' camp by the river bank where we hid until night. Trevor Bedford joined Ross and me. We left at night and walked to Halls Creek. Then I went to the Territory, to Waterloo Station near Timber Creek.

The Boss must have been angry at me for leaving as he got the Missus to write to the WA Chief Protector of Aborigines to get me back. The Welfare found me at Waterloo. The Boss wrote to the NT (Northern Territory) Chief Protector of Aborigines for information about me; they had a file of every Aboriginal person in the Territory. He replied to the fellow in Perth who wrote back to the Missus telling her that I was over 18 years and an adult, and the days were gone when they could have the station

---

<sup>5</sup> Moola Bulla was the main government ration station in the Kimberley, and functioned as a pastoral property. Located near Halls Creek, it was established to be self-supporting, training Aboriginal families to farm the land with European methods. Children were removed from other locations and placed at Moola Bulla, or were sent from there to institutions in Perth.

Aborigines returned to them by the police. I have a copy of the letters from the National Archives.

Around then I worked on stations around the Northern Territory: Waterloo, Limbunya, and Kirkinbie for two years. Then back to Springvale for three years and then Bedford Downs for a year, which was run by Bill. I then went to Ruby Plains, south of Halls Creek as head stockman. That must have been in the early 1970s as I remember hearing about cyclone Tracy on the radio. [JB: *Cyclone Tracy was a tropical cyclone that devastated Darwin on Christmas Eve, 1974.*].

By then I was married to Susan, a Gija and Jaru woman from Halls Creek. She had been brought up in Moola Bulla Station. Her parents worked on Moola Bulla, her father was the bore mechanic. I knew her grandmother Maggie who lived on Springvale. She was Gija. Our first child was born in 1970; he was called Vincent. He got sick two days after we brought him home from hospital and they sent him for treatment to Derby by plane but he died.

Wesley came next and then Leroy a couple of years later. I used to work on Ruby Plains and come back into town (Halls Creek) on the weekend. When Leroy was about six or seven years old, one day I found her (Susan) in the pub sitting on a fellow's knee, so I left her. That was around 1979, and I had a few hard years then bringing up the boys by myself though I got some help from Maggie, their grandmother. She moved into Halls Creek so the boys could go to school while I worked on Ruby Plains. Around that time I was drinking. One time I woke up looking at the sky, and knew I was in trouble. I got off the grog then. Now water makes me drunk.

I moved to Louisa Downs in about 1983 where I met Doreen Cox who became my second wife, and I have lived there since. Her mother was from Margaret River Station and her father was Frank Cox. Frank's father was Freddie Cox, one of the sons of Billy Cox. He was the Scotsman who used to take the mail from Derby to Fitzroy Crossing. He moved from Noonkanbah to take up Louisa Downs and just took his little son Freddie when he was about 5 years old. Billy Cox died in 1944.

Doreen and I had a big family of five children. She had a son, John, from a previous marriage and he took my name, so he is my son as well. First there was Joshua (he was born in 1983), then Geraldine (she was born in 1985); Miriam (she was born in 1988); Joseph (he was born in 1990); and Catherine (she was born in 1996).

We moved to Ganiniyi outstation a few years back, just us and another family. Doreen passed away a few years ago (2003) and since then I have lived by myself although all my children have lived near me on Ganiniyi outstation until recently. This is close to Yiyili community where the children go to school, and on the old Louisa Downs station.

I've got the papers for compensation from the government. I got them from the National Archives woman; I can apply for recompense for being taken away when I was a baby. You know I think they should have provided for me financially as they took me into their family when I was a baby. I got \$5000, what good is that? They should have given me enough money to start my own business.

I've told how Joanne from the National Archives of Australia helped me find the documents which recorded the names of the people in my family. She put me in contact with them and so recently we heard about the funeral of one of my brother's daughters and all travelled up to Kununurra for it. I am not sure how she died, it was very tragic. I saw her husband at the funeral and met a lot of the family. They told me that my brothers and sisters never forgot me, and were always asking after that little piccaninny who was taken away. My brothers Felix, who lived in Port Keats, and Smiler, who lived in Timber Creek, are both dead now, same as my three sisters.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Ms Joanne Wood of the National Archives of Australia for her help in finding the documents which record the names of the people in my family and for putting me in contact with them in 2009 and 2010.



**Coolibah with members of his large extended family 2010 © John Boulton**

### **“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”**

(Faulkner, 1951: Act 1; scene 3)

Coolibah's narrative provides a way of understanding how the disadvantage suffered by Aboriginal Australians has its origins in “Structural Violence”. This is defined as violence which is mediated as a second and third order effect through the legislative power of the dominant society or the effects of the brutality mediated by the power differential (Farmer 308). It is based on a steep socio-economic gradient which is structured in legislation, and hence legal sanction through and in which violence is perpetrated as a second or third order outcome (Farmer 309). Each chapter of his life story illustrates one or other aspect of the structural violence which Coolibah or a member of his family has suffered from the marked differential in power, wealth, and access to civic amenities. Each chapter illustrates an outcome of different causal

pathways, but each has its roots in the massive cultural dislocation at the colonial frontier.

Whiteness theory asserts that the structures which uphold privilege are invisible and are therefore neither seen nor understood by white people (Martin-McDonald and McCarthy 126, Hartigan 495). The reverse of this is that some structures mediate violence through powerlessness and its effects on individual health, for example as measured by the incidence of ischaemic heart disease and diabetes; on interpersonal relationships as measured by marital breakdown, domestic violence and spouse homicide, and child abuse; through crime against property, through road trauma; and through self-harm from drug and alcohol abuse and suicide (Abbott 151).

In discussion with Coolibah as to what message he wished to tell white Australians I said, imagine a thousand *kartiya* are going to read your story, what do you want to tell them? His answer was for white Australians to know and understand from his life story how hard it has been for Aboriginal people at the frontier; how much they have suffered: physically from abuse, from not being paid, and from lack of education. He also emphasised honesty and hard work; how he is known in Halls Creek as a man of character.

This made explicit the central purpose of narrative in terms of its message and the public persona whom it portrays. As described by Riessman, narrative in society works at several levels. For the individual, she asserts that narratives “construct past events and actions in a personal narrative to claim identities and construct lives” (2); and that narratives are a “...means by which identities may be fashioned” (2). The inner narrative also allows the past to become bearable: “All sorrows can be borne if we put them into a story” (Isak Dinesen, qtd in Riessman 4).

The structure of Coolibah’s story is artificial in terms of being divided into brief sections which provide a linear sequence whereas the component stories were told to me at different times. The stories of the physical abuse he suffered caused him distress, although the presence of his daughters Catherine and Geraldine, who took a lively interest in them, modified this and helped show their worth in that the daughters learned more about their father through them. Likewise the recent meeting with family at the funeral in Kununurra seems to have provided some closure. Although Coolibah grieves that he never met his elder brothers and sisters, he gets some emotional support from knowing that they never forgot him and were always asking after the little piccaninny who was taken away.

**“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there”.**

(Hartley, 1953:17)

As a baby Coolibah was taken from his family when his mother reputedly ran away. Where were his grandmother and aunties? His foster-mother did not know; she just heard that his mother had run away and assumed it would be best for him to be brought up in the house rather than the women’s camp. Did his father Hector have any say in the matter? It seems not; certainly neither the Missus nor her son recall asking him, and when they left to go to WA he would have remained behind in the stock camp. Coolibah’s rights as a child to have access to, and be brought up by, his relatives were dismissed, but with the best of intentions. That was the way things were done then, and it was commonplace according to my Aboriginal informants.

The distinction between an understanding of the setting of events and the “how” is crucial to Australian history because of the explicit politicisation of the history of the fate of Aboriginal people (Clendinnen 48). This applies both to the decades following contact when, according to locality and time, between fifty and ninety percent of people were killed, or died of disease or starvation (Jebb 136-166, 242), as well as the second phase of colonisation from the 1840s to the 1970s when official control of Aboriginal people wrought the basis for the future intractable social consequences which this story alludes to (Haebich 47, 90).

As a teenager Coolibah was physically abused by the boss’s son, who was *de facto*, if not *de jure*, his foster-brother. Coolibah has neither forgotten nor forgiven the level of harsh treatment he suffered, and his bitter remarks about how the white stockmen treated the Aboriginal stockmen, and the known level of sexual abuse of their women, is evidence for the degree of second-order violence which was condoned at the frontier.

The letters he refers to from the Chief Protector of Aborigines of WA and the NT, written in 1962, provide extraordinary evidence of the thinking of the time. That is, if a stockman left the station, the owner could ask the police to bring him back. However the reports which I perused in the National Archives in Darwin from the same time period refer to some stockmen having to give evidence to the magistrate over the beating of an Aboriginal stockman by an overseer on a neighbouring station to where Coolibah was brought up. The reports tell how after the court case these stockmen walked to another station to get employment, and when the original station owner asked for them to be returned, the police wrote a letter of support of their actions because of the reputation of the overseer for brutality. So this was evidence that by the 1940s people were being allowed to exert their civil rights to move where they wished.

The death of Coolibah’s first son at a few days of age in 1970 tells of the high infant mortality in that area, and reflects poor antenatal care, poor maternal nutrition, and a high risk of infection, in the context of a highly disadvantaged community with absence of an adequate level of primary civic amenities. The national mortality rate for the period 1983 to 1993 for Aboriginal children under the age of five years was 9.42 per 1000 which was five times the rate for non-Aboriginal children of Western Australia. The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) of 29 per 1000 was also five times the national IMR (Ritson 2). This is twice the current IMR of Aboriginal children in the Kimberley region between 2005 and 2010 of 15.8 per 1000, which remains five times that for the metropolitan district of the State (Gee 9) The post-neonatal mortality (children from 28 days of life to the end of the first year) for the Kimberley remains ten times the WA State average, with deaths mainly from infection (Gee 9).

Coolibah’s anger at his first wife’s behaviour reflects the pernicious effect of alcohol on family function and interpersonal behaviour. Alcohol-fuelled violence represents the manifestation of the internalised rage and frustrations felt by the disempowered and humiliated: from the historical frontier white-on-black violence it has elided into black-on-black violence. The legal sanctions against alcohol use by Aboriginal people were lifted in the 1970s, but it was not until another ten years or so later that Aboriginal women started drinking. The extent of the alcohol-fuelled mayhem in Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek led to the imposition of alcohol restrictions in both communities in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

Coolibah's story is emblematic of the lateral violence suffered by Aboriginal people, and which plays out in lethal dysfunction within and between families, and measured by the statistics for school attendance and consequent low literacy. Although frontier violence is now two generations past, its legacy remains and exerts its relentless effects, as this story tells.

In her analysis of the contemporary state of Arrernte society in Central Australia, Austin-Broos describes the effects of two separate historical disruptions, namely the pastoral invasion of the late nineteenth century and the displacement of the Arrernte people to the Hermannsburg mission, and that of the 1980s era of self-determination (5). She asserts that this political strategy which was designed to empower Aboriginal peoples had the opposite and paradoxical effect as they became stranded beyond the outer margins of the mainstream economy on remote outstations with neither the intellectual resources of education and literacy, nor sufficient financial resources, to carve out an economically independent way of life.

For the Arrernte the consequences of the overt and covert violence of the nineteenth century displacement was a catastrophic fall in population from disease and starvation around the turn of the century, and again in the 1919 influenza pandemic (Austin-Broos 8). The social determinants of the morbidities which shorten lifespan in remote Australia by several decades are less evidently the consequences of these events or of the 1980s political upheaval, but they nonetheless represent the outcome of structural violence from colonisation which has affected different nations in different ways, but all deleterious to health and life expectancy (Kunitz 24-25).

Farmer defines structural violence as that exerted systematically and indirectly by everyone who belongs to a certain social order (Farmer 307). It typically occurs most evidently where social gradients and wealth are steepest, and where racism is ingrained. This would accurately describe the situation in Western Australia in the nineteenth century (Jebb 73), but now Australia prides itself on its egalitarianism and being a nation in which social mobility is open to all.

The erasure of historical memory is an enabler of oppressive structures for which there is no individual to blame (Farmer 307). "The erasure of history is subtle and incremental and depends on the erasure of links across time and space", and suggests that living links need to be recognised for the historical context to be useful (308). The History Wars of the 1990s, and the Northern Territory Emergency Response,<sup>6</sup> provide evidence of the power of government to erase unwelcome perspectives on Aboriginal history (Altman and Hinkson 307). Paradoxically, this need to assert that the present is different from the past, and hence to achieve historical discontinuity in one's work, is also a feature of those dedicated to Aboriginal well-being (Kowal 339). In Coolibah's

---

<sup>6</sup> In June 2007, purportedly in response to a federal report on child abuse entitled "Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: 'Little Children are Sacred'" (Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 2007), the Federal Government announced a "national emergency response to protect Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory" from sexual abuse and family violence (Brough, 2007). This has become known as the "NT intervention" or the "Emergency Response". In the following months the emergency announcements were developed and formalised into a package of Commonwealth legislation (see *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007*).

story, he asserts these links with the past, and is explicit in wanting his story to be heard in order that this historical memory of his people is not forgotten.

Farmer advocates the need for the integration of history, political economy and biology to understand structural violence, and for it to be measured in outcomes of morbidity, the violation of human rights, and violence and homicide within the affected communities (308). Coolibah's account gives the human dimension of these metrics: abuse of his rights as a worker for wages and protection; the lack of emotional support during his critical years of adolescence; the lack of his rights to be educated; and the inevitable consequences of alcohol misuse and family disruption. "History and its erasure are embodied as bad health outcomes" (Farmer 315), with disease being the toll of structural violence. Farmer cautions that "exploring the anthropology of structural violence is a dour business" (308), which this story attests to.

In the commentary to Farmer's article, Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes note that most violent acts are not deviant but seen as within the service of social norms and material interests; further, that "ethnographers can best contribute by rendering visible these erased and unexpected linkages between violence, suffering, and power" (318). Coolibah's experiences as a teenager in the stock camp and later in his adult life can thus be seen not through the romantic lens of the iconic Aboriginal stockman of the outback doing it tough, but as emblematic of the gross power differential of the time.

Coolibah's life story also tells us about the challenges of "Closing the Gap".<sup>7</sup> For every tall spare elderly stockman of age 65 there are three men who never made it to that age, and allowing for the doubling time of twenty years or less for the Aboriginal population, the population profile shows that at least one quarter of men fail to reach the age of 40 years (Morphy 20). They have never had to do hard physical work in their youth, and typically have a very high risk of heart disease as a consequence of the precursors to diabetes, if not clinical diabetes, which is made much worse by cigarette smoking and heavy alcohol use. If one adds to this the cumulative damage done to children's kidneys from repeated post-streptococcal inflammation nephritis, then this loads the risk for kidney failure in adult life.

The high levels of morbidity and premature mortality amongst Aboriginal Australians belies the notion of a healthy Australia. Heggenhougen notes that "in modern society, inequality becomes embodied biologically, as those lower on the ladder suffer higher morbidity and mortality rates" and that "if (the practitioner) is to make a dent in the prevalence of the diseases from which his patients suffer, he must attend to the matrix of fundamental causative factors that disproportionately condemn the majority of marginalised humanity to disease and death" (320).

However there are three categorical errors in conventional thinking about closing the gap in health: first, that if enough money is spent, all will be well eventually. That this is not so was shown from data in the *Strategic Review of Aboriginal Expenditure*, released in 2011 under Freedom of Information, which states that despite an expenditure

---

<sup>7</sup> "Closing the Gap" is a commitment by all governments in Australia to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians, and in particular Indigenous children. It is a national strategy agreed through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and linked to reforms aimed at overcoming Indigenous disadvantage in education, housing, and health (see Australian Government, 2009).

of \$3.5 billion, “past approaches to remedying Aboriginal disadvantage have clearly failed, and new approaches are needed for the future” (Commonwealth of Australia Department of Finance and Deregulation 10). Likewise for specific spending on health, the lack of an overarching philosophical framework, and poor accountability of spending, makes it impossible to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of contemporary strategies (Hudson vii).

Second, that for health workers of all disciplines being right (correct) about their bio-medical analysis can easily segue into righteousness about what should be done—an insight for which I am grateful to Hannah Bell whose work in walking in both worlds can inform practice (Bell 1).

Third, that so-called social determinants of health and disease provide a sufficient explanatory framework for what is intergenerational psychic trauma (Carson, Dunbar, Chenell and Bailie 41). I argue that only by recognizing the depth of the upstream (distal) aetiological factors can there be a real understanding of the causal pathways to the current level of morbidity. The elucidation of the epi-genetic mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of risk for morbidity and premature mortality from early life trauma brings a whole new dimension to the complexity of this health tragedy (Tremblay and Hamet 27), and renders the concept of social determinants of health insufficient as a full explanatory framework.

In conclusion, Coolibah’s story provides a narrative through which non-Aboriginal Australians can bridge the gaps in imagination and of disbelief that in this wealthy nation there is a parallel society of unmitigated disadvantage. In another time and another place, Coolibah could have fulfilled his potential and become a leading professional figure in society. His moral courage, resilience, yet acceptance of life realities, make him a remarkable man. His life story brings to reality the imperative for the nation to address the moral challenge of putting right the consequences of such profound disadvantage.

### Works cited

- Abbott, Stephen. “The psychosocial effects on health of socioeconomic inequality”. *Critical Public Health* 17.2 (2007): 151-158. Print.
- Altman Jon C., and Melinda Hinkson. *Coercive Reconciliation. Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*. Sydney: Arena Publications, 2007. Print.
- Austin-Broos, Diane J. *Arrernte Present, Arrernte Past: Invasion, Violence, and Imagination in Aboriginal Central Australia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Print.
- Australian Government. *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: the Challenge for Australia*. Canberra: Australian Government, 2009. Print.
- Bell, Heather R. *Men’s business, women’s business. The spiritual role of gender in the world’s oldest culture*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions. 1998. Print.
- Bent Jinny, Ngarta, Pat Lowe, Richards Eirlys, and Juguna Mona Chugun. *Two Sisters. Ngarta and Jukuna*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Press, 2004. Print.
- Bourgois, Philippe, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes. Commentary on “An anthropology of structural violence”. *Current Anthropology* 45.3 (2004): 317-318. Print.
- Brough, Malcolm T. “National Emergency Response to Protect Children in the NT”. Media Release, 21 June 2007. Web. 03 January 2008.

- Carson, Bronwyn, Dunbar, Terry, Chenall, Richard D. and Ross Bailie, eds. *Social determinants of Indigenous health*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2007. Print.
- Clement, Cathie. Personal communication. August 2012.
- Clendinnen, Inga. "The History Question. Who owns the past?" *Quarterly Essay* 23 (2006). 1-72. Print.
- Commonwealth of Australia. *Bringing them Home. National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. Canberra: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission / Australia Government Publishing Service, 1997. Web.
- Commonwealth of Australia. "Strategic Review of Aboriginal Expenditure". Canberra: Department of Finance and Deregulation, 2010. Web.
- Dixon, R.M.W. "Summary report: Linguistic change and reconstruction in the Australian language family" in Philip Baldi, ed. *Linguistic Change and Reconstruction Methodology*. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990: 393-402. Print.
- Farmer, Paul. "An anthropology of structural violence". *Current Anthropology* 45.3 (2004): 305-316. Print.
- Faulkner, William. *Requiem for a Nun*. New York: Vintage Books, 1951. Print.
- Gee, Vivien. *Perinatal, Infant and Maternal Mortality in WA: 5-year cohort of 2004-2008 births*. Perth: Department of Health Western Australia, 2010. Web. Accessed 20 December 2013.
- Haebich, Anna. *For their own good: Aborigines and government in the South West of Western Australia 1900-1940*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1988. Print.
- Hartigan, John. "Establishing the facts of Whiteness". *American Anthropologist* New Series 99.3 (1997): 495-505. Print.
- Hartley, Leslie Poles. *The Go-Between*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953. Print.
- Heggenhougen, Kristian. Commentary on "An anthropology of structural violence". *Current Anthropology* 45.3 (2004): 320. Print.
- Hudson Sara. *Closing the Accountability Gap: The First Step Towards Better Aboriginal Health*. Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies, 2009. Print.
- Hunter, Ernst. *Aboriginal health and history: Power and prejudice in remote Australia*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Print.
- Jebb, Mary Anne. *Blood, Sweat and Welfare: a history of white bosses and Aboriginal pastoral workers*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2002. Print.
- Kinnane, Steve. *Shadowlines*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2003. Print.
- Kowal, Emma. "The politics of the gap: Indigenous Australian, liberal multiculturalism, and the end of the self-determination era". *American Anthropologist* 110 (2008): 338-348. Print.
- Kunitz, Stephen J. *Disease and social diversity: The European impact of the health of non-Europeans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. Print.
- Lockwood, Douglas. *I, The Aboriginal*. Adelaide: Rigby, 1962. Print.
- Lowe, Pat, and Jimmy Pike. *Jilji, Life in the Great Sandy Desert*. Broome: Magabala Books, 1990. Print.
- Marshall, Paul, ed. *Raparapa: Stories from the Fitzroy Drivers*. Broome: Magabala Books. 1988. Print.
- Martin-McDonald, Kristine, and Alexandra McCarthy. "'Marking' the white terrain in indigenous health research: literature review". *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 61.2 (2007): 126-133. Print.

- McDonald, Connie, N. *When you grow up*. Broome: Magabala Books, 1996. Print.
- Meakins, Felicity. "Land, language and identity: The socio-political origins of Gurindji Kriol". *Social Lives in Language: Sociolinguistics and Multilingual Speech Communities: Celebrating the Work of Gillian Sankoff*. Miriam Meyerhoff and Naomi Nagy, eds. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008: 69-93. Print.
- Morwood, Mike. Personal communication. March 2010.
- Morphy, Frances. "Population, People and Place: The Fitzroy Valley Population Project". Canberra: ANU Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Working paper No. 70/2010, 2010. Web.
- Munro, Morndi, and Daisy Angajit. *Emerarra: a man of Merarra*. Mary Anne Jebb, ed. Broome: Magabala Books, 1996. Print.
- Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse. *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle, 'Little Children are Sacred' Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse*. Darwin: Northern Territory Government, 2007. Print.
- Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007*. Australasian Legal Information Institute. Web. 26 Jan. 2009.
- Riessman, Catherine, K. *Narrative Analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Press, 1993. Print.
- Ritson, Mathew. "Health care in Halls Creek 2000". Unpublished submission. Kimberley Aboriginal Health Plan Steering Committee, 2000. Typescript.
- Scott, Kim. *That Deadman Dance*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2010. Print.
- Sutton, Peter. *The politics of suffering: Indigenous Australia and the end of liberal consensus*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009. Print
- Tremblay, Johanne, and Pavel Hamet. "Impact of genetic and epigenetic factors from early life to later disease". *Metabolism Clinical and Experimental* 57.2 (2008): 27-31. Print.
- Wright, Edie. *Full Circle*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001. Print.

**John Boulton** has worked in the Kimberley as senior regional paediatrician since his retirement from academic practice at the University of Newcastle in 2005. In the Kimberley he advocates the need to inform medical practice with an engagement in its unique history and artistic tradition, and from anthropological and demographic perspectives. He uses photography as a way of connecting with people and country, and the study of rock art as a way of creating respect for the cosmology. He is privileged to have friendships with Aboriginal people whose own lives have been lived so differently but who share many of the same life values.