

*My grandfather's family secrets: unravelling layers of race and belonging
in an Australian mixed-race family*

Kim Burke and Victoria Grieves

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Abstract: By tracing aspects of the life story of Kim Burke's grandfather Alexander (Alec) Nickel Lewis and his father Matthew Lewis, this article aims to unravel the secrets kept in order to blur any reference to the true racial identity of family members. This was for good reason, in an attempt to avoid the bureaucratic interventions with which Aboriginal lives and movements were regulated by the Australian government. With this family the White Australia Policy impacted upon their lives and their efforts to retain and reclaim an Australian identity under the shadow of the Boer War. The many trials that Kim's great grandfather, as an Aboriginal soldier in South Africa, had to undergo to repatriate to Australia show another aspect of the impact of racial segregation. It is shocking to realise that the passing of the White Australia policy in 1901 impacted on Australian Aboriginal men and their families who were in South Africa for the purposes of serving the Empire. This also determined the hardships of my family over time, the later removal of my grandfather's siblings and secrecy about their descent. The family was torn apart by government policies for the removal of Aboriginal children. Not only were members of this family actively working around policies that existed to socially ostracise them but others in the Australian community in particular were assisting them to achieve social justice in extremely difficult circumstances. Lastly, through Kim's grandfather's reticence about his identity, his life-long quest to reunite his family and the disquiet and sorrow in his life, we learn of the long-term consequences of the Australian policy of removing Aboriginal children from their family.

Keywords: Aboriginal family history; Boer War; White Australia policy.

My grandfather, who I called Pop, was dark, all the family was dark but not as dark as he was. Anytime anyone mentioned how dark Pop was, he would say that he got too much sun in South Africa when he was younger as that was where he was born.¹ We always accepted that as a reason in the innocence of childhood, and now of course I understand it as a harmless joke to put people off the topic. Pop was the second son of Matthew Lewis and Margaret "Maggie" born on 20 November 1903 in Johannesburg. Matthew had gone to South Africa as a member of the 4th West Australian Imperial Bushmen, a regiment of Mounted Infantry.

¹ Extract from the Register of Births within the District of Johannesburg within the Colony of the Transvaal, Alexander Nickel Lewis b. 20 November 1903.

Pop could fix anything with a rusty nail and a piece of wire. He was very thrifty. For example, he never wasted a drop of paint; some of the colours of the furniture in the house were unbelievable because he mixed all the little bits of paint together. He was the cake maker and my grandmother “Nin” would say how the cake wouldn’t bounce on the floor. He said you could always pick it up and saw a piece off it and eat it if you dunked it in your tea! It was so dry it could last for months, but never did, as we kids loved it. Pop was originally a saddler and harness-maker and had a boot-making business. He carried out this trade when in the Australian air force in World War Two. He had been a jockey in his early career, had that slight jockey build and he loved horses. His father had told him about the tragedy of the Australian forces having to abandon their horses in South Africa. He said they were not just animals they were a soldier’s best mates.

Nin always said that her family never agreed with her marriage to Pop. She said that her and Pop never had the nice wedding given to them like her older sister Aunty Lola had, yet she always stopped short of explaining why and then changed the subject. In retrospect, this was likely to do with his colour. After my grandfather died my grandmother handed me the only book that my grandfather owned. Not overly literate, he indicated an attachment to his book by signing his name on the inside. The book is Bill Harney’s *Tales from the Aborigines* and she said to me “Isn’t this lovely? Here, these are your grandfather’s people”.²

Pop had lived with his father in a little one-room shack at Warialda, New South Wales. So long as it wasn’t raining they used to eat outside, out the back, under a few sheets of corrugated iron used as a makeshift veranda. The shack can be seen in the background of this small photo (below left) that survives of him at that age. The other photo is of Pop with his youngest son in the backyard of their home in Beardy Street, Armidale.



Alexander (Alec) Nickel at Warialda on his wedding day in 1934. © Kim Burke 2013



Alexander (Alec) Nickel Lewis at Armidale 1943 holding his youngest son. © Kim Burke 2013

² Harney, W.E. *Tales from the Aborigines*. Rigby Limited, Sydney 1959.

From being a saddler and boot-maker my grandfather left to work in the Small Arms Factory at Lithgow during the war and then joined the Royal Australian Air Force where he spent time in New Guinea. His family had nothing in the way of wealth but Pop was not a person to have a debt and he always returned a good deed. I understand this now as reciprocity, an important Aboriginal cultural value. Pop felt a debt to the people of Papua New Guinea for their hospitality, care and protection of him and other Australian troops and so in later life sponsored a young man from an orphanage there to get an education. Pop said that we would not have made it through New Guinea without them.

My grandfather would often listen to Bob Randall's song "Brown Skin Baby (They Take Him Away)" when it was released in the early 1970s. This song became an anthem for the stolen generations of Aboriginal children in Australia. Pop always sang along soulfully to the tune. He asked me a few times if I knew what the song was about and I said that someone had taken a baby, not really understanding the full history. He said to me "Do you know why?" and I said no, but he never explained it further. Maybe he knew that I would not know what to do with that information at my age at that time.

When I look back now, my experience of my grandparent's house and the lifestyle there taught me about my Aboriginality. I believe that the Australian climate of racism and denial of heritage was such that my great grandfather's and my grandfather's families were forced to hide the fact of their Aboriginal descent. This was something I learnt about when I was much older. However, they could not change the way they lived their lives and the knowledge they had of their own family's history.

My grandfather's parents

There are mysteries in my grandfather's family history, some which might never be solved. His children have always defined themselves as Australian with their father having Swedish, Dutch or Danish descent and recently have come to accept some South African descent. Lately, some of the family have admitted there had to be Aboriginal descent in the family. However, Matthew Lewis, my grandfather's father, was recruited into the Light Horse from Western Australia and this makes him an Australian at that time.³ But was he a citizen? This seems unlikely.

Matthew's death certificate tells us something of the confusion. It records his birth as being in Norway and that he had been resident in Australia for forty years, that is, that he came here in 1900.⁴ However he was resident in Australia for all of his forty-nine years before enlisting in May 1900.⁵ Elsewhere his birthplace is reported as being Denmark⁶ and later London, England.⁷ His birthplace is reported as Australia on my

³ Discharge papers Pte Matthew Lewis held in the possession of his son, Alec, my grandfather, a copy now held in my possession. Also mentioned in ... Certificate of Naturalization number A599 held in the possession of his son, Alec, my grandfather, a copy now held on my possession. See also National Archives of Australia (NAA), Commonwealth of Australia, Home and Territories Department, File of Papers 20/4253 folio 2. Accessed 20 November 2013

<<http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine.asp?B=38987>>.

⁴ Registrar of Births Deaths Marriages, Death Certified in New South Wales, Australia, Certificate number 27442 of 8 Dec 1940, Matthew Lewis.

⁵ NAA 20/4253 (endnote 3).

⁶ NAA 20/4253 (endnote 3).

⁷ Discharge papers of Pte Mathew Lewis 35110 3rd Battalion, Railway Pioneer Regiment, held in the possession of his son, Alec, my grandfather, a copy now held in my possession.

grandfather's birth certificate from South Africa.⁸ He was actually naturalised as Australian at the age of sixty-eight in 1920 when living back at Warialda.⁹

Matthew's birth and birthplace are a mystery even now. There seems to be no birth certificate though he reported that his date of birth is the 16 June 1852. Sometimes it is recorded as 1854, and sometimes July rather than June. He joined the Light Horse in Western Australia in 1900 as an Australian and he reported later, in an application for naturalisation that he had made his way from Glenn Innes NSW to Western Australia where he signed up.¹⁰ At the time of his enlistment he was forty-eight years old, he had already lived a life and it seems at this time he was also married. His wife Maggie was much younger than him, their first child Matthew William was born in December 1901 or January or February 1902 when she was twenty-four years old¹¹ and he by this time was either forty-nine or forty-seven.

My grandfather's mother is reported to have married Matthew in South Africa even though a certificate cannot be located in South Africa or any state or territory of Australia. Her name is Maggie and she is said to be Boer. Does this then make her South African? This is truly a puzzle. She is reported to be Dutch on her death certificate. The photo that survives of her indicates she is clearly of mixed race and to me and many others in the family she has features that are obviously Aboriginal.



Maggie Lewis, date of photo unknown.
© Kim Burke 2013

From 1901 until 1917 Maggie is constantly pregnant and has ten births, five in South Africa and five in Warialda, near Glenn Innes NSW, that have been recorded. The first

⁸ Extract from the Register of Births within the District of Johannesburg within the Colony of the Transvaal, number 2046, registered 3rd Dec 1903, Alexander Nickel Lewis b. 20 November 1903, father Matt Lewis, European, birthplace Australia.

⁹ NAA 20/4253 (endnote 3).

¹⁰ NAA 20/4253 (endnote 3).

¹¹ NSW Death Certificate 1910/003648.

born 1901, Matthew William, died in 1910 in Warialda at ten years of age; Alexander Nickel, my pop, was born 20 November 1903; Sydney John born October 1904; Sophia Adelaide and Stephen A born February 1907, Stephen died on board the ship back to Australia, Sophia died soon after getting back to Sydney June of 1907; Andrew John born April 1908 in Warialda was a prisoner of war in Singapore and died there on 11 February 1943; Edward Leslie born October 1909; Mary Brigid born September 1911; Frances Muriel born February 1915; Jessie Margaret October 1917. Fourteen days after Jessie's birth, the mother Maggie died and was buried at Warialda.¹²

At the time of Maggie's death Matthew is sixty-five years old. Pop is now the eldest child and had been out at work since the age of eleven, driving the wagon that was piled with wool or skins. In the photo below, he is on top of the load and his father Matthew is standing in-between the other two men on the left.



Left to right: Unknown man, my great-grandfather Matthew Lewis, unknown man. On the wagon, my grandfather Alec Lewis at the age of approximately 13 years. Photo taken c. 1916 at Warialda. © Kim Burke 2013.

One can only imagine how difficult it was for a single father of his age to be able to work and also care for infants and small children. We don't know what may have happened at this time but we do know that Matthew found it necessary to secure his status as an Australian citizen in order to care for his family. As an Australian citizen he was eligible for an aged pension three years after being granted naturalisation.¹³ More of that story later.

Matthew's war service, his time in South Africa and return to a White Australia

Matthew enlisted with a mounted infantry regiment, the 4th West Australian Imperial Bushmen and received the regimental number 121.¹⁴ In this period the colony of Western Australia was a part of the British Empire until the Federation of the Australian states moved to form a Commonwealth government in 1901.

¹² All relevant birth and death certificates in the possession of the author, Kim Burke.

¹³ NAA 20/4253 (endnote 3).

¹⁴ Discharge papers of Matthew Lewis held in the possession of his son, Alec, my grandfather, a copy now held on my possession.

The regiment left Australia for South Africa on 8 May 1900.¹⁵ While in military service in South Africa Matthew was awarded the King's Medal and South Africa 1902 Clasp, the Queen's Medal and Transvaal, Orange Free State and Cape Colony Clasps and the South Africa 1901 Clasp.¹⁶

Just a little over 14 months after arrival the regiment was to leave South Africa on 20 July 1901 to return to Australia.¹⁷ However, Matthew's record states "on completion of the engagement his wish to remain in South Africa" and he was then enlisted in the British 3rd Railway Pioneer Regiment. He finished his service on 1 February 1903 and on 21 March 1903 was paid a special war gratuity of five pounds.¹⁸

Perhaps Matthew had indicated that he wished to stay in South Africa because of the requirement of the new Commonwealth government of Australia that the Aboriginal men were to prove their suitability to return to Australia under the White Australia policy. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 prevented the return of any Aboriginal soldiers to Australia without special application.¹⁹ Whatever his reasons for staying, by 1907 he was on his way home. With the competitiveness of labour in South Africa and the associated legislation of lesser wages for "people of colour" Matthew would have found it difficult to remain. Many other Australians also found it hard to find employment and were in dire need of returning to Australia. When alerted to this situation, the Premiers and Prime Minister decided on a repatriation process for Australians left there since the end of the Boer War.

The government of NSW commissioned an agent in South Africa, George Valder, to handle these affairs on their behalf.²⁰ The return of Matthew, Maggie and children from South Africa to Australia occurred under the shadow of the White Australia policy of the newly formed Australian government. The "problem" of the return of the coloured South African wives of Australian men was also dealt with in accordance with the strictures of the Immigration Restriction Act. After a Royal Commission in the Transvaal it was noted that in all cases a man's character was lowered by his relationship with a coloured woman.²¹ Given this difficult environment for people of colour, how did Matthew and Maggie make it back?

The Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, although quashing the wishes of many Aboriginal men and their families who applied for repatriation, was met with the quick thinking of two Aboriginal men. They maintained that since they had left Australia prior to the Act it should not now apply to them.²² George Valder the NSW government agent forwarded this request to the new Commonwealth government. The Prime Minister,

¹⁵ *Australian Contingents to the Boer War*. Accessed 9 Nov 2013.

<<http://www.bwm.org.au/site/Contingents.asp>>.

¹⁶ Correspondence from The Treasury, Western Australia 3 March 1914 to E. Flynn President, Newcastle and Northern District Naval and Military Association, Newcastle, NSW 907/14. Paper held in my grandfather's possession, a copy now in my possession.

¹⁷ *Australian Military History of the 20th Century, Boer War West Australian Contingents*. Accessed 12 Nov 2013.

<http://alh-research.tripod.com/Light_Horse/index.blog/1927790/boer-war-western-australia-contingents-sent-1899-1902/>.

¹⁸ Pte Matthew Lewis Discharge Papers copies in the possession of Kim Burke.

¹⁹ Valder, G. *Report on the Repatriation of Australians from South Africa* by Mr George Valder, Commercial Agent for New South Wales in South Africa, p. 345. 20 Nov 2013. <<http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine.asp?B=12251>>.

²⁰ Valder. p.326-328.

²¹ Valder. p. 344.

²² Valder. p. 341.

Alfred Deakin himself responded that if they fulfil all the aspects of application to enter Australia and importantly, agree to pay their own way, they would be free to apply for repatriation. As it happened only two of the Aboriginal men managed to pay for their return.²³ It seems many other Australians who were not identified as Aboriginal were able to enter into an arrangement of indebtedness to the government for their fares home.²⁴ Matthew's name does not appear on the records of debts owed to the government for passage to Australia and the reason must be that he paid his own family's fare.

For the Aboriginal men to fulfil their application standards there is the requirement that they be of good character, be personally interviewed and have their oath taken by Valder. There were further requirements including that they furnish a good behaviour report from the police, a statement from their employer to say that they were of good working character and also proof that they were of good Christian character.²⁵

Thus the year 1907 saw a flurry of activity in the Lewis family in Johannesburg. In order to be able to return to Australia the birth certificates and baptismal certificates for all of the children had to be organised. Matthew collected all his discharge papers and uncollected pay, proof of employment, a police check, a letter attesting to his family's status as Christian worshippers from a Minister of religion, his family's birth certificates, and with the assistance of the Catholic Mission House the children's baptism documents, just prior to their passage.²⁶ Thus it is that my grandfather's birth and baptismal certificate extracts are dated 6 and 7 March 1907. At that time Pop was four years old.

Here then is an indication of Matthew's status as an Aboriginal person in the eyes of the government of the time. The documentation and identification of Aboriginal servicemen is difficult as even in WW2 there were no accurate records of a soldier's race.²⁷

The repatriation process was very demanding of applicants and of the 3,000 people who made application Valder accepted only 1,300.²⁸ This also means that it is possible that many Australians who left for the Boer War never returned from South Africa and these are likely to include also Aboriginal Australians, especially given the fact that Valder only allowed the repatriation of two Aboriginal men, as previously mentioned. Dale Kerwin of Griffith University has spoken on ABC Radio of fifty Aboriginal servicemen left behind.²⁹

Matthew's family returned to Sydney on the ship *Cycle* in 1907.³⁰ Although found to be suitable by Valder³¹ the conditions on board were reportedly extremely hazardous and

²³ Valder. p. 345.

²⁴ Valder. p. 341.

²⁵ Valder. pp. 329-330, 340-342.

²⁶ Copies of all relevant documents in the possession of Kim Burke.

²⁷ Hall, Robert A. *Fighters from the fringe*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1995. p. 194.

²⁸ Hall. p.346

²⁹ ABC Radio, PM, *Claims 50 Aboriginal men left behind during the Boer War*, aired Monday 31 May, 2010. Accessed 19 Nov 2013.

³⁰ <<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2010/s2914322.htm>>.

³¹ Ancestry.com. New South Wales, Australia, Unassisted Immigrant Passenger Lists, 1826-1922 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007. Original data: New South Wales Government. Inward passenger lists. Series 13278, Reels 399-560, 2001-2122, 2751. State Records Authority of New South Wales. Kingswood, New South Wales, Australia; and New South Wales Government. Reports of vessels arrived (or Shipping reports). Series 1291, Reels 1263-1285, 2851. State Records Authority of New South Wales. Kingswood, New South Wales, Australia.

357 passengers signed a petition requesting better food and conditions to be presented to the government.³²

In Sydney their daughter Sophia Adelaide, the baby of five months of age died in their residence at Giovanni's Coffee Palace in George St after suffering gastro enteritis for five weeks.³³ Maggie had managed to rear three babies safely, but the conditions on the ship were beyond her control where her family's health was concerned.

Matthew Lewis as a naturalised Australian

In 1980, given the family knowledge that Matthew had been granted naturalisation as an immigrant to Australia, I rang the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs to find more information about his application. They assured me that if he had been granted naturalisation that there would indeed be a file on him and that I should put my request in writing. Unfortunately their reply was that there was no record for a person of that name in the records.³⁴

Over a decade later when searching for more information about Matthew's possible immigration to Australia, we were amazed to find a file in the National Australian Archive for his application for naturalisation as a person born in Denmark.³⁵ How confusing it is for the family researcher! Nevertheless, Matthew Lewis, labourer of Warialda, applied on 25 March 1920 and followed this with a letter to the Minister for Home Affairs in July 1920 asking for the process to be hastened. Correspondence from the Attorney General to the Home and Territories Department clearly states that Matthew had never been registered as an alien. Registering in this way is the beginning of the process for immigrants to receive approval for residency and citizenship. They anticipated that the police report on this man would enlighten them as to why he had failed to register. There was also a request for any documents that might show that he was Danish or, in the absence of these, a statutory declaration to that effect.³⁶

Matthew's statutory declaration does not give any reasons for this failure to register as an alien. He states he is a labourer who has worked for Reginald Hubert McGee, the owner of Tattersall's Hotel, for the past four years. It also states that he was born in Scolberg (sic), Denmark, of Danish parents. Since his arrival in Australia he has spent time in Glen Innes in 1892, Casino, then Western Australia. He is a widower, his wife having come from South Africa, and he lists his children by name and age.

In his application Matthew claimed that he arrived in Australia in 1874 at the Port of Brisbane. I cannot find his name or that of any possible family in the shipping records for any port in Australia, including Brisbane.

This file is marked by the urgency of the letters sent by his friends and associates for this naturalisation process to be completed and a pension granted immediately. Sergeant Cronin of the Warialda Police wrote a letter in support of his application in April 1920. He said that Matthew was a Dane who came to Warialda in 1907 and has always

³¹ Valder. pp. 336-337.

³² National Library of Australia, Trove, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW: 1842 - 1954), Monday 10 June 1907, page 6. Accessed 19 Nov 2013.

<<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/1318390>>.

³³ NSW Registrar of Births Deaths & Marriages. Death Certificate 1907/003755.

³⁴ Correspondence from Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Adelaide 26 November 1980, S80/16077 to Kim Burke, in her possession.

³⁵ NAA 20/4253 (endnote 3).

³⁶ NAA 20/4253 (endnote 3).

conducted himself well, being very loyal and his sympathies with Australia. He had seen both sets of discharge papers from his engagement in the Boer War. He recommended that the application be approved and this was passed successfully up the chain of command within the NSW Police Force.

John Archibald McGregor, Justice of the Peace, Stock Station and General Commission Agent in Warialda and formerly the Mayor of the town, wrote to the Minister for Home Affairs to urge the granting of naturalisation in order that Matthew could get a pension. His support was on the basis of Matthew being “an enthusiastic and willing, patriotic worker”. McGregor spoke on behalf of other citizens of Warialda when he said that Matthew could suffer a great injustice if he were denied the pension for three years; “surely some provision must be there and can be extended in such a case”. McGregor reports that while Matthew’s wife had died some years before, the children were all well cared for. Moreover McGregor argues strongly that Matthew had already taken the oath of allegiance when entering the South African war, thus becoming a British subject at that time, so why should he now wait three years for the pension?

Matthew was required to advertise of his intent to become a naturalised citizen in two newspapers in the district, which he did. He was also required to have three referees who were landholders “householder’s certificates” to vouch for his application. These men Reginald Hubert McGee, Andrew Stewart, owner of the *Warialda Standard and Northern District Advertiser*, and Justice of the Peace John Archibald McGregor. All gave strong indications of his good character and repute and that he was “Able to read and write British”.

Matthew Lewis of the many identities and descriptions over the sixty-eight years of his life and latterly of Warialda, was naturalised an Australian citizen on 17 October 1920.³⁷ What is wonderful and heart wrenching is the concerted attempt that his “mates” in Warialda made to support this widowed man with so many children in his care. It may have been that these men may have known Matthew in his war service or they knew of him and his record, and this may have been the factor that overcame considerations of race in their relationship. In his book *Black Diggers*, Hall observes how racism was diminished between Australian men at war,³⁸ probably due to the feeling of dependence and brotherhood that developed within units.³⁹

Matthew had managed to battle against old age to support his children for the initial years since the death of Maggie. Naturalisation would mean he would be financially able to support his children with receipt of the old age pension. This was soon to change; his strategy for the survival of his family was in tatters.

The removal of the children

Pop wrote a list of his brothers’ and sisters’ names, their birth and any death dates that he kept in his drawer. He did this because when he was nearly seventeen years old in 1920 the authorities took the children away. After this no one knew where anyone was and it was a time of great stress that never fully ended in my grandfather’s lifetime. At the time of removal the children were aged as follows: Syd was nearly sixteen years old, Andy was just turned twelve, Ted eleven, Mary almost nine, Frances just five and Jessie almost three. As the years went by, the older ones were trying to find each other with

³⁷ NAA 20/4253 (endnote 3).

³⁸ Hall, Robert A. *The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989: pp.70-71.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

very limited success and my grandfather contacted most, but not all, of them only late in his life.

My grandfather had always known that his brothers, my Uncle Ted and Uncle Andy were removed to an institution that was close to where their family had resided at Warialda, and they managed to remain in distant contact over the years. Over time Pop and Uncle Ted managed to locate most of the family through the assistance of the Red Cross. Matthew died at the age of 88 in 1940 without having the clear knowledge of where all of his children were living and without having had his family reunited in his lifetime.

They were in fact living very close to each other geographically, yet a lifetime away. Pop always said that they would not have known each other if they passed each other in the street. When I finally located Aunty Jessie in 1980, a few months after Pop had passed away, she also expressed that same belief. Aunty Jessie knew nothing of her family at all and was so saddened that she never really knew the concept of family. She had been “placed” with a family in Chatswood. It is not yet known how the decisions were made regarding the placement of children with families and the different girls’ and boys’ homes.

Aunty Jessie had told me that she and Frances were both domestics at Kirribilli House during their working lives, and then lived together in Maroubra for many years. Frances’s daughter Dawn, who is now in touch with me, recently confirmed this story. The girls had very distressing upbringings and their children were to also suffer, some under separation from family and similar lives to those their parents had lived. The Australian Government now recognises that there are intergenerational effects of removal policies on the personal and family level.⁴⁰ Frances had been reunited with her father and brothers before her death in Redfern in 1954. No member of the family knows what became of Sydney. I have not been able to locate a marriage or death for him in NSW. Sadly Andy died in the fall of Singapore during WW2, with my grandfather and his brother Uncle Ted never knowing what became of him. It was only with my recent research that the family has begun to know the circumstances surrounding the lead-up to his death. The only children that were to benefit from a long and close sibling relationship were Pop and Uncle Ted.

Each of the children endured much more than children should be exposed to and survived their experiences of removal and upbringing away from the protection of their loving family. Their stories of a personal struggle with the system, other relationships and self are virtually identical to the one Aunty Mary talks of.⁴¹ The secrets they held of their treatment after their removal was hardly ever spoken of, yet evidenced in their tears and the sadness of their everyday lives and the difficulties they had with relationships. They arguably made important contributions to Australian social life in spite of the trauma. My grandfather for one never really got over this experience and felt guilt that the younger ones had been removed on his watch as the oldest brother. That is why my Pop believed that a family needed to be together no matter what.

⁴⁰ Australian Government Department of Mental Health and Aging, *Evaluation and effects of the Bringing them home and Indigenous mental health programs*. Accessed 11 Dec 2013.

<<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/bringing-them-home~appendix-b~b-1-8>>.

⁴¹ Terzack, Mary. *Orphaned by the colour of my skin: A stolen generation story*. Melany, Qld: Verdant House, 2008.

Aboriginal identity was never spoken of within this family, until it became “safe” to do so. This was only after generations of “hiding”, far enough away from the times and regulations of the removal policies and long reach of the government. It also came with a generation of lighter skinned family.

This article is only a beginning; much more work needs to be done on retracing the history of our families and the contribution that Aboriginal men made to the defence of their homelands during the many conflicts punctuating the twentieth century. Aboriginal people and historians are rewriting virtually every part of the history of this nation; not only to include their ancestors, and research on Aboriginal servicemen is just one part of such enterprise. Research into Aboriginal family history also reveals the complexities of their lives and the loving care with which they tried to keep their families and relations together. In this regard, Matthew Lewis’s life is an extraordinary example of the ruptured, secret and fraught lives of Aboriginal men and their attempts to care for their families. In this case his life experience also sheds light on the way that the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 affected Aboriginal people and the White Australia Policy that flowed from it. In spite of his patriotism being demonstrated to a high degree through military service he suffered enormous indignities, injustices and family loss through government policies. Pop? Well, he was a survivor, who learnt to hide his past as a form of protection for his family that he loved with every breath of his being.

Kim Burke is of Aboriginal descent from both her parents’ families and identifies primarily with the Wiradjuri Williams family from the Burrendong Valley in NSW. Her passion for her family history has led her to achieve a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Newcastle. She is currently the Chair of Lake Macquarie Aboriginal Corporation after having worked at the University of Sydney. She continues to research the survival of her family after a time of major incursion into their traditional lands and will be a student of Wiradjuri language and culture at Charles Sturt University in 2014.

Victoria Grieves, ARC Indigenous Research Fellow at the University of Sydney is Warrimay from the midnorth coast of NSW. The first Aboriginal graduate with BA Honours and with a double major in history, her book *Aboriginal Spirituality: Aboriginal Philosophy and the Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal people* is widely accessed and much cited. She is currently developing the ARC funded research project *More than family history: Race, Gender and the Aboriginal family in Australian history*. Vicki works to progress Indigenous Knowledge within Australia; her approach to research is cross-disciplinary and deliberately from a Warrimay epistemology.