

Pictures from My Memory: My Story as a Ngaatjatjarra Woman

by Lizzie Marrkilyi Ellis, introduced and edited by Laurent Dousset

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Pictures from My Memory is an engaging personal memoir of Lizzie Marrkilyi Ellis, a Ngaatjatjarra woman growing up in the Australian desert and becoming a national multilingual interpreter. It also contains an overview of the Ngaatjatjarra language, culture and kinship system as an appendix by the anthropologist Laurent Dousset. It is a book for both the wider community and academics interested in Australian Indigenous history and culture told from an insider's point of view.

Laurent Dousset, her friend and editor, chooses *uprightness* to describe Lizzie's account of a life lived through one of the most 'challenging historical periods of Aboriginal white interrelationships in Central Australia: the progressive rapprochement and efforts of mutual understanding after periods of complete negation and destruction by the white settlers' (p. xiii). For Lizzie, she is returning to the pictures from her memory and seeing them critically through the eyes of a mature woman, an experienced professional interpreter and internationally travelled language teacher and university researcher. Her people were not citizens until 1967, and their lives on reserves, missions and settlements remained under government welfare control. Aboriginal people were normally not given any explanation, as there were no skilled interpreters to ensure informed consent – such as when children were taken away.

Lizzie's story starts with memories passed down from her parents and grandparents who first saw white men in Purli Karil, the Rawlinson Ranges, in the 1950s. Lizzie was born in these ranges in 1962, in Ngaatjatjarra country just west of the border between Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Her early childhood was spent roaming the lands of her ancestors, secure in her identity, and surrounded by extended family speaking her mother tongue – and where the only presence of white

men was the Giles Weather Station built in 1956 by the Australian Government's Weapons Research Establishment (WRE) program to monitor the Maralinga atomic testing. Here, Lizzie recounts stories without judgement in the manner of *kiti-kiti wangkanyi* – a traditional, indirect way of speaking – and the story is all the more poignant for this. Throughout the book, her style is not didactic or academic. Rather, she persuades through the desert peoples' recursive storytelling style, sharing her real-life experiences of situations where language was key to cultural identity and cross-cultural understanding.

Leaving the Rawlinson Ranges at the age of five, Lizzie travelled with her family 230 kilometres south-west to Warburton mission. The family then travelled 100 kilometres west to Leonora, a small town surrounded by sheep stations, a gold mine and an Aboriginal reserve, where they stayed about a year. All school-aged kids had to live in a hostel on the other side of town from the reserve, and the police made sure they went to school. Aboriginal peoples' lives were controlled by the state: 'That was the time when they took kids away: the Stolen Generation. The authorities took away all the half-caste kids and trained them in cities, but they didn't take away all the full-blood kids like us' (p. 8).

The hostel life was hard for little kids like Lizzie who hated the teasing and fighting, but she found protection when her big cousin Dorothy arrived. People from all over the Western Desert came together in the reserve; the elders taught the children which people were family through the extended kinship system.

Lizzie learnt to read and write English at the school, and she started her career as an interpreter early, reading all the mail for her extended family. She also continued learning traditional culture – hunting, camping out bush with relatives and attending ceremonies during school holidays. When they moved about 300 kilometres north to Wiluna, her family lived on the mission and Lizzie attended the mission school for young children. At age 10, she was sent with other older children by bus via Meekathara to live at Karalundi mission about 240 kilometres north-west from her parents in Wiluna. This school was for 'full-blood' girls and boys, while 'half-caste' children were sent for training in to big towns. Lizzie and her sisters noticed this splitting up of the children but accepted it as normal.

Education provided Lizzie with the key to literacy in English, the language of governance and power. Coupled with her fluency in many dialects of the Western Desert language, she quickly became an important interpreter for many people. In 1988, she commenced working at the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs and trained as a professional interpreter. In this role, she was able to empower her people in negotiations with police, government or medical officers, though Lizzie found the role of professional interpreting difficult: one could not confuse their role with being a friend or relation, especially as Indigenous interpreters are often called to assist their own people in court legal matters involving criminal

defence or land rights, and the translation of concepts cross-culturally – for instance, human rights and the western legal system – were difficult. A poignant example here was the difficulty of translating the right of children to have an education as ‘every child can or must go to school and nobody can stop that child from going to school, even the mother or father’ – a difficult concept to grasp for people who associate school with police-enforced attendance (p. 104).

During the 1990s, Lizzie became part of a national professional cohort of Indigenous interpreters involved in the federal government’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Initiative Program, developed to retrieve and revive Indigenous languages. She attended national conferences where meeting other Indigenous interpreters was inspiring as they could share ideas and ways of maintaining languages. Lizzie became aware of the national extent of pain and dispossession felt by many Indigenous people mourning the loss of their language and cultural knowledge. Her experience interpreting has led her to understand a profound relationship between language and cultural worldviews, and that ontological concepts of people, place and spirituality can only be fully expressed in their language of origin. Lizzie’s plea to mainstream Australia is to support the maintenance of Indigenous languages and respect cultural and linguistic difference and diversity.

Lizzie also acknowledges the gradual loss of traditional Ngaatjatjarra/Ngaanyatjarra cultural knowledge and language proficiency within recent generations of her own family. Pragmatically, she realises the next generation must make their own way in a rapidly changing world. However, she believes that maintaining knowledge of their cultural heritage and language is core to identity in this multicultural world. She has ensured her two daughters, who married into white society and live in Canberra, maintain ‘a good understanding of our culture because they spent time with my family every year and participated in cultural activities’ (p. 112).

A life of embodied translation has been captured in word pictures in this book. Lizzie Marrkilyi Ellis’s memoir flows like water down a dry desert riverbed. Her voice bubbles with warmth and humour while speaking clear truths about the struggle for survival of desert languages and culture in the harsh environment of colonisation. It is a generous gift to a nation still trying to come to terms with the fallout from an often brutal colonisation process that has not yet been resolved by attempts at reconciliation. Lizzie’s voice comes on the warm desert winds speaking to all Australians. A translator mediating between the vastly different worlds of black and white Australia, she invites her readers to sit with her a while, to listen to her stories and to think deeply about the importance of maintaining First Nations’ languages and cultural identity in Australia today.

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