

## *A Handful of Sand: The Gurindji Struggle, After the Walk-off*

by Charlie Ward

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Review by Rolf Gerristen  
Charles Darwin University

This book is an excellent and accessibly written local history of the 20 years following the celebrated 1960s Wave Hill Walk-off. Perhaps surfing – as much as creating – an attitudinal shift in the mainstream Australian community, the Gurindji Walk-off came to symbolise Aboriginal resistance to oppressions as well as persistence in the face of hostility from powerful establishment interests. Elements of the non-Aboriginal Australian community (some unions, some activists and eventually the Labor Party) accepted this Indigenous aspiration and allied with the Gurindji. A wave of support promised to realise the Gurindji's dreams. Aspirational purity was then overgrown and stunted by some political hostility allied with much more bureaucratic incapacity and incoherence. Ward is a historian who was peripherally involved in the events he describes, although he is generally even-handed in his assessments. He introduces the usual characters of settlement politics, bickering activists, robber opportunists and passing bureaucrats that still interpose between the Aboriginal people of northern Australia and the state. After the post-walk off struggle, the Gurindji themselves started to divide, so that the dreams of the old heroes of the 1960s began to be less important as social change hit their community, as it did similar communities across remote Australia.

What were these dreams? The walk-off started over equal pay, racial equality and respect and the return of their land. Through Ward's book, we obtain a picture of Vincent Lingiari's thinking – a separate but equal settlement, land and cultural and political autonomy. Ward's story here is how that did not happen. There are detailed

stories of how educational, local governance and retail services rose and fell and ultimately failed to satisfy the ideals of the elder Gurindji men. These stories can be replicated in dozens of other remote settlements.

Some of the service failure was a result of confused bureaucratic objectives. Take, for instance, Murramulla, the cattle operation the Gurindji began. Various bits of the bureaucracy attempted to help and required the Gurindji to create a standard 'efficient' cattle company. The Gurindji apparently saw the situation differently. To them the cattle operation was supposed to provide food for the camp and employment for all the young men, as well as protecting important ceremonial and belief sites and thus serving an educational function for the younger generation. Single-use bureaucratic objectives meant single-use lines of funding. The cattle station could never be 'economic' under Gurindji objectives.

Ward understates the widespread prevalence of processes he describes in this book (which is why I described it as a local history). One example is that of the Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign (BTEC), which is blamed for the ultimate destruction of the Muramulla Cattle Company. Ward sees evil plotting by Northern Territory Government officials as behind the malignant effects of the BTEC, making Murramulla insolvent. However, the BTEC was a consequence of the Australian Government Department of Trade's strategy for entering the US beef market. In this 'bigger picture', the interests of under-capitalised Aboriginal cattle stations in the north were not even considered by the national policymakers. So Murramulla and other stations became collateral damage in achieving that national objective. (Does this remind the reader of the live cattle export ban under the Gillard Government and its similar impact on the Indigenous Land Corporation and Indigenous Business Australia—funded Aboriginal cattle stations?)

Charlie Ward's book ends on a ringing note: 'Their fight was over but their vision remains' (p. 309). Similarly, his afterword – bringing events sketchily nearer the present – ends with 'Against all odds, Lingiari's legacy lives' (p. 320). This marks the curious paradox of this book. It is both a foundational saga and a historical tragedy. The 1960s Wave Hill Walk-off was the stuff of legends (for both blackfellas and whitefellas). The subsequent disappointments and frayed relations with government were not unique to the Gurindji but similarly shared by hundreds of other Aboriginal communities across remote Australia.

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