

## **Fred Myers review of Alec B. O'Halloran, *The Master from Marnpi: Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, Pintupi Man, Papunya Tula Artist***

(Sydney: LifeDesign Australia, 2018), 243 pp., HB \$80, ISBN 9780959056549

Alec O'Halloran's *The Master from Marnpi* has my mind jumping in many directions. It is a beautiful volume, a biography of the Pintupi man Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, self-produced, with extensive visual images. It is not published through a scholarly press, but it is an exemplary work of scholarship, of sourcing and citation, and it will not only be a fundamental piece of work for those interested in Indigenous Australian art but also, in my view, for many others with curiosity and interest in Indigenous life and history.

Full disclosure. I have met Alec on many occasions, as a source in his research, a senior scholar in his area and a fellow student of Western Desert Indigenous painting. His commitment to the project of preparing a biography of the Pintupi painter Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri seemed to me remarkable given the obstacles: he never met the late Namarari, did not know his language and had very little experience of the relevant Aboriginal communities, their culture or their histories—nor did he have professional training as a scholar. Did he know of the challenge facing a biographer of Namarari, especially the interaction of a life with quite different constructs of personhood?

I was asked to review his book, presumably, because I am one of the people who has had personal and professional knowledge of the Pintupi painters, knowledge of their language and of their practices. Reading it, I was torn between my considerations of method, my local knowledge, my memories of O'Halloran's tireless pursuit of those of us who might have helpful information and my admiration for the sheer devotion and inspiration of this quest.

Namarari, to use the name O'Halloran rightly chooses, had a life trajectory that took him from childhood at the eastern edge of the Western Desert (when that region was beyond colonised Australia) to the Lutheran outposts of Haasts Bluff and Hermannsburg; to the pastoral station of Tempe Downs and back to reside at the government settlement of Papunya (in the 1960s); the outstation of Brown's Bore (in the 1970s); and eventually, in the 1980s, to his own outstation, Kintore at Nyunmanu, and Kintore itself. At Papunya (in 1971) he began to paint under the auspices of Geoff Bardon and what became the artists' cooperative Papunya Tula.

O'Halloran is concerned to show that by the time he began to paint, he had already had a wealth of experiences at the edges of Euro-Australian frontier life where he adopted the clothing, and especially the hat, popular among Aboriginal stockmen.

O'Halloran embraced this project because of his admiration for Namarari's painting and a desire to know more about him. Eventually, he decided to do a biography of this man, not quite realising at first that there are very few biographies of Indigenous persons on this kind of frontier.<sup>1</sup> After a few years intensively investigating sources of knowledge about Namarari, interviewing people like me, various managers of Papunya Tula and curators of exhibitions with his work, O'Halloran—in later middle age but undaunted—began a PhD program with Howard Morphy at The Australian National University to acquire the tools of understanding. This is of some significance in understanding this book, because it is clearly (to my eye) guided by the training he received to develop a methodology, a consideration of sources, and questions one might ask. The attention to detail, including careful surveys of the rate and quantity of paintings over time, is scrupulous, leaning towards a positivist search for the right fact. If this sounds critical, I want to express my admiration for the project in its detail and thoroughness, and also to say that the product is immensely suggestive and illuminating of Namarari as a painter, as I will discuss below.

The research for this project is necessarily meticulous because Namarari left few documents other than his paintings and a couple of recorded interviews. If engagement with the subjectivity and outlook of a person is necessary for a biography, how can one go about this, particularly given the complex differences that shape Pintupi personhood and no accessible textual/literary representations of interior life? The research includes interviews with almost every person alive who might have come into contact with Namarari: from art managers and curators to his wife, nephew and grandchildren; other researchers, local historians, outstation managers, government officials, filmmakers, and on—people who have engaged with the Indigenous world of Central Australia over a 50-year period. O'Halloran scoured the archives for census listings of Namarari and his family, explored government and mission documents and various ephemeral materials (catalogues, posters), and gained permission to use interviews collected by two other writers/scholars associated with Namarari in the 1970s and 1980s, John Kean and Philip Batty.

The biography proceeds through inference—interpreting Namarari's predilections and experiences through the historical sources of Indigenous life in the cross-cultural context of the Central Australian frontier, a lens that might not be entirely clear to some readers although it is key to the book and its interpretive apparatus. O'Halloran has taken up the framework that Pintupi have adopted for themselves—namely, of a history they have articulated and narrated that is focused on their

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1 Vivien Johnson wrote biographies of Michael Nelson Tjakamarra and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri. And there was at least one film made about the famous Pintupi leader Nosepeg Tjupurrula.

return to their homelands and self-determination after what might be seen as a temporary exile in the lands of their neighbours. To do this, to establish the basic framework of cultural value for Pintupi people, O'Halloran necessarily draws on the work of other scholars—myself, Vivien Johnson, Jeremy Long and others who have elicited these accounts. This is crucial, if done somewhat mechanically, as the author measures the facts (difficult to get) of Namarari's life, work and travels against these anthropological analyses to arrive at an interpretation of what mattered to him.

Thus, we find that Namarari was committed to his relationship to his country (*ngurra*), which he painted exclusively, evaluated against the understanding we now have of rights painters have, to family (*walytja*) and The Dreaming (*Tjukurrpa*)—3 key concepts identified in my own ethnography.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Namarari's life is measured against the obligations and duties understood to be incumbent upon a *wati*, an initiated man, although there are no statements from Namarari or Pintupi commentators that directly make this linkage. Indeed, if Indigenous subjects might be difficult foci of biography, Namarari would be exceptionally so: an unusually quiet, reticent and self-contained person, as many have noted. Yet these interlocutors felt there was something to gain if you persevered with him. That makes consideration of Namarari's importance as a subject complicated.

Namarari's story, at least in part, has been of interest to *other* interlocutors, as it appears in the film *Benny and the Dreamers* (1992),<sup>3</sup> and to many who met him in Central Australia. His narrative of the revenge killing of his father drew considerable attention, as does the raucous story he shared with his 'brother' Benny Tjapaltjarri of gulping down tins of jam when they first met white people. Namarari's story also speaks to the trajectory of the Pintupi themselves, a 60-year period of leaving and returning; we have Norman Tindale's photographs of Namarari from a 1932 Mount Liebig Expedition in which he is identified as a boy by name, and later followed up by Tindale at Haasts Bluff in 1948. Geoff Bardon and his brother made another film, *Mick and the Moon* (1977),<sup>4</sup> with Namarari as the main subject, but in this rather strange film, as O'Halloran politely observes, Namarari never talks himself.

My comments are meant to show how O'Halloran drew on a range of materials, not unfamiliar to other scholars, but expanded on by his dedicated search for Namarari's possible presence and traces in other locations. O'Halloran starts with the identification of Namarari's Dreaming and ties to country, especially Marnpi and Nyunmanu, to which he had inherited rights and which are the source of his enduring identity as a Pintupi man—the man from Marnpi. The author establishes Namarari as a boy who experienced the tragedy of his father's death and his grandmother's

2 F. Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Place, Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

3 Ivo Burum, dir., *Benny and the Dreamers* (CAAMA Productions, 1992).

4 Geoffrey Bardon, dir., *Mick and the Moon* (Tasmanian Film Corporation, 1977).

suicide from grief, adoption by a second father, support of his mother, work as a stockman, and so on. Within that story, O'Halloran pulls out the specific details of violence against Aboriginal poachers by pastoralists and his sense of waiting and watching, to show that Namarari is to be understood as someone with his own family and work, and adapting to a changing world, a positive account of what he did and could do, in direct opposition to the assimilation agenda that the author repeatedly cites as obscuring the painter's relationship to European requirements and controls (p. 103). O'Halloran interprets Namarari as patient, waiting, watchful, and learning how to make himself useful as a bridge between white and black in order to support his family according to his own values, enacting the values of a *wati*, an initiated man—which he indicates is a 'provider'. In pursuit of his interpretation of Namarari as a significant participant in the cross-cultural encounter, he repeatedly analyses various documentary materials or interview data to return to his contributions to a 'cross-cultural project'. Or, to take one more example, the discussion of Namarari's ability to generate income and make deals with people (like Philip Toyne) 'most likely made him an important provider at Brown's Bore and the object of some pressure by his family or fellows' (p. 96), a contemporaneous equivalent of the scalps-ration-cash exchanges of the dingo scalp economy of Central Australia of the 1930s–1940s in which many Pintupi had participated.

It is difficult to represent a world view through so many veils and abstract analyses. At times, the cultural forms appear too objectified to make sense of a subjectivity we can only infer. More simply said, the use of the anthropological analyses and some of his interpretive frameworks is sometimes abrupt and mechanical, placing the choices Namarari faces in what might be a commonsense economic framework. These feel quite sudden, an interruption of an engagement with Namarari as a Pintupi person. Pintupi personhood, which theoretically underlies any question of choice, I have argued, is relational and more specifically a dialectical articulation of values of relatedness (identity with others) and autonomy (one's own business). Finally, the author's attempts to identify words and places in Pintupi through similarities of their possibly mistaken spelling in English orthography is often problematic as O'Halloran does not know the language; the interpretation of these traces of place and story requires more local knowledge of ancestral stories and local geography than he has, making these interpretations methodologically suspect.

I write this from the point of view of someone who knew Namarari and has spent many years living with, thinking about and engaging with people from Namarari's community. Cross-cultural biography writing is difficult. Writing a biography of a man like Namarari, or even other Pintupi people I have known, is not an easy task, even if one knew them personally. The cultural difference or distance is considerable, already requiring much interpretive work to grasp the significance of personal details. Not least is the questionable relationship between the concept of

a 'biography'—the writing of a life—and the facts of an individual's history when the subjects may not have a cultural script of a 'life' as a story or a framework of a life-project. What might be the form for such a work, and its goal?

The author's characterisation of Namarari as quiet, reticent, patient and committed to his family rings true to me, and the many sources O'Halloran approached said the same. As data, he lays it all out, and many writers would not go to such lengths to reiterate the point. Indeed, it is the hallmark of this book: very little seems to be left out. It is, then, perhaps an extraordinary *catalogue raisonné*, a gift to the Master of Marnpi that the details of his life and his influence on others are gathered up, as sometimes happens in funeral tributes.

O'Halloran's aim comes into focus clearly in the final chapter, when he turns explicitly to a series of paintings and makes them intelligible as significant aesthetic works through an understanding of the man and the man through his painting—his works as the extension of himself available to analyse. As I write this, I am struck by the resonance with Michael Jackson's recent treatment of art as 'a mysterious interplay of inner and outer realities, and the existential imperatives of finding some way of integrating these realities'.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever my critical concerns, *The Master of Marnpi* is full of brilliance, the result of perspiration and persistence, but also inspiration. In the end, we find the author takes us to a consideration of Namarari's painting practice (with his own thanks to, among others, Paul Sweeney and Wayne Eager, former field officers of Papunya Tula) that completely melds with his careful probing of Namarari's life to open up a compelling understanding of the painter's work, his stylistic choices and modes, and the trajectory of his late work. It is here, in elucidating the characteristics of his paintings, that O'Halloran is most convincing in his individuation of Namarari. This, after all, is perhaps the goal of the project: to understand Namarari's life as a man who is a painter, an artist.

The last section of the book is a suggestive and illuminating analysis of a range of individual paintings. I particularly appreciate his development of 'templates' in Namarari's paintings of *Marnpi* (a Kangaroo Dreaming place) and for a series of Bandicoot paintings, connected to various sites. Other stylistic developments include his expanded use of the undulating grid in various works. Experimentation around these features crucially establishes the painter's artistry, his virtuosity. Finally, O'Halloran notices the extraordinary development of the *Tjunginpa* (hopping mouse) paintings, with their all-over dotting, and the suitability of this work

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Jackson, *The Work of Art: Rethinking the Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 184.

for a man of immense and precise concentration, and—importantly—that the preponderance of these paintings in his late life owe to the market popularity and their simplicity for a man whose creative energies were reaching their end.

The following passage brings the threads together as O'Halloran offers his account of Namarari's method and style of work, speaking to who he was:

He valued the privacy of a dedicated studio. He attended to the whole of the canvas with consistent effort and attention. He worked towards variations in design patterning and paint opacity to create visual interest. He was a patient craftsman who selected his materials carefully and worked in deep concentration. He was methodical in the application of paint and creative in the design of his compositions. His meticulous attention to detail occasionally bordered on an obsessive approach in an activity that totally absorbed him ... He derived pleasure from his work. (p. 156)

And more, pointing to the work that painting did for this particular man, O'Halloran points to the significance of Namarari's very routine as a deeply present characteristic of his practice and life. 'Namarari's paintings', he writes:

were a manifestation of an inner connection, a meditative approach to painting. Observers described him as being 'in the zone' when painting, or preoccupied with his own thoughts in a 'contemplative state.' Was he aligning himself emotionally to his nearby *ngurra* and to the *tjukurrpa* realm in the invisible beyond? Whatever the case, Namarari had found a place for himself. (p. 156)

O'Halloran's artist-biography has brought attention to the ways in which Indigenous artists appropriate their 'traditions' not only in distinctive ways, but also in ways that might allow an understanding of who they are in more complex ways.

The story has a powerful ending. The final painting, unfinished, is reproduced, and we learn that he died in Alice Springs, from kidney disease (as so many other Pintupi painters have), His grandchildren say they wanted to bury him at his own country, Nyunmanu (where his outstation was located), but it was 'too far out'; his 'wish to once again breathe Kintore's air, was not granted' (p. 156). If Namarari's story ends here, with some disappointment, it is the beginning of another story of Pintupi self-determination, as they worked to bring dialysis to remote communities so elders like Namarari could stay on country.

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