6. Ordinary people enduring extraordinary things

For Indigenous people in Australia the encounter with modernity was produced by colonisation. This happened at different times in different parts of the country. In the Pilbara, in Western Australia, colonisation came relatively late, in the mid nineteenth century, and occurred in different stages. The pastoral industry was the first industry to be established in the region. It brought colonisation, but little modernisation. The beginning of inexorable modernisation and fragmenting of connections with the traditional past dates from the iron-ore mining boom of the 1960s. A defining experience of modernity for Pilbara Aboriginal people was marginalisation, encapsulated physically as well as socially in the town of Roebourne. A central struggle in the face of modernisation has been to maintain or re-create meaning, including what it means to have a good life, ‘in the face of cultural devastation’. Colonisation has meant that the meaning of a good life for Indigenous people is inextricably linked to their relationship with other Australians and to how that encapsulating group defines a good society.

Colonisation as a vehicle of modernisation

On a humid Sunday morning in October 1987, I attended the weekly service at the Pilbara Aboriginal Church in Roebourne. The sermon was delivered by Yilbie Warrie, a senior Yindjibarndi law man and an elder in the church. He presented to the congregation what he saw as the three symbols of modernisation for his people: a beer bottle, a packet of cigarettes and a can of Fanta soft drink. For him, all three were symbols of destruction and death—rampant alcoholism, wasted money and health, ravaging diabetes—and the social death arising from a loss of meaning in his people’s lives. ‘These,’ Yilbie said, ‘take our money, the kids not fed, make our people sick, die. We got a big problem. People down here drinking all the time. We tell people all the time, but nothing.’ In a later public forum, he made the same point in different words: ‘The Aboriginal people are now suffering. They are sick in the heart.’

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1 Lear (2008).
2 Yilbie, like a number of other Roebourne people named in this book, is now deceased. In Aboriginal custom in some parts of Australia, their names would not be used for a significant period. This is not formalised to the same extent in the Pilbara, although people often do avoid using a deceased person’s name, depending on the context.
3 Johnston (1991: 1).
A few weeks before, my eldest daughter, then aged twelve, had gone with her class from the Roebourne Primary School for an end-of-term excursion to the beach close to the nearby mining town of Wickham. We had arrived in Roebourne well into the school year and she had only been at the school for a few weeks. She was therefore an outsider. As well, she was one of only three non-Aboriginal students in the class. In the way of children, her outsider status was interpreted in terms of the obvious differences, in this case, colour. When she and the other two non-Aboriginal children went to board the bus at the end of the day to come back to Roebourne, they were refused a place by the other children and told, ‘This is a black bus. You shouldn’t be on it.’ They came home with one of the teachers.

In contrast, on another October day—as it happened, the eleventh anniversary of the 6 October massacre in Thailand—the three children and I were invited on a visit to two places outside Roebourne of particular significance to Yindjibarndi people. We went with Carol Lockyer, then an officer in the Department of Community Services and a Kuruma woman who had spent much of her life living and working in Roebourne. One of the places she took us to was Ngurrawaana, a small living area of social significance, set up in the 1980s on a lease granted by the Western Australian Government as part-compensation for the destruction of cultural sites by the building of the Harding Dam. Its aim was ‘to establish an environment where Aboriginals can live without the influence of alcohol’. We bumped along the 90 km of dusty pipeline road from Roebourne to Ngurrawaana. The area had been leased for 21 years by the WA Public Works Department to a group led by Yindjibarndi elder Woodley King.

Woodley was there to welcome us, as was another senior Yindjibarndi man, Allan Jacob. They took the time to show us not only the camp but also some of the surrounding country, Allan explaining to the children how the sap from one of the local trees made good cough medicine, Woodley showing us a termites’ nest where they had successfully hunted an echidna. Both men talked about the importance of Ngurrawaana in allowing people to be on their own country, not just to get away from the grog, but also in order to maintain Yindjibarndi culture and law.

The second place we visited was central to that culture and law, for Yindjibarndi people, but also for other neighbouring groups who used to meet there for ceremonial and social purposes. This was the oasis of Millstream (Ngarrari) on the Fortescue River, the spine of Yindjibarndi country that rises back to the tableland and the Chichester Range. We picnicked with Carol in the shade of the paper bark and palm trees growing along the banks of the deep river, where the different language groups used to meet and feast. Millstream now forms part

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4 Rules of the Ngurrawaana Group (Aboriginal Corporation) 1983, Objects of the Association, s. 6(a).
of the Millstream-Chichester National Park, but it remains of the highest sacred significance.\(^5\) A written submission from a Roebourne group to the Seaman Aboriginal Land Inquiry in 1983 described it this way: \(^6\)  ‘Our Law derives from the land itself and from certain objects and sites on the land. Our Law derives from the Millstream area and stretches throughout the Pilbara and into parts of the Kimberley.’

In addition, Woodley worried about the impact on the Millstream aquifer of the water that was being pumped out for the new mining towns. He lamented the government regulations that meant that Yindjibarndi had no special rights there, though he was glad his son could live there as a ranger for the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and have some responsibility for caring for his country.

These different incidents suggest that, for the Aboriginal people in and around Roebourne in the 1980s, modernity was crucially experienced in the first instance as alienation from their land, and an assault on the basic values and moral framework, deeply related to the land, by which they defined the good. Compounded by colonisation, modernity has also constituted the Other, at different times for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, in terms of race. This opposition was expressed in its simplest form by the children from the Roebourne Primary School. More radically, it was constructed from the beginning of colonisation by the process of colonisation itself.

**Constructing the Other: The first colonisation, 1866–1960**

Colonisation came later to the Pilbara than to many other parts of Australia, including more southern regions of Western Australia. Remote as it was from the centres of settlement, it became of interest only in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first pastoralists arrived in 1864. The town of Roebourne was established in 1866 to service their needs. The site for Roebourne was chosen for two reasons: it was the only place in the area with a secure freshwater supply, and it was reasonably close to a suitable harbour at Cossack. The fresh water came from the Harding River, *Ngurin* to Ngarluma people on whose country the towns of both Roebourne and Cossack were built. It was therefore the coastal Ngarluma and the Yaburara, a possible Ngarluma subgroup and their

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\(^6\) Mount Welcome Pastoral Company Proprietary Limited, 14 September 1983.
immediate neighbours on the Burrup Peninsula and adjacent islands, who bore the brunt of displacement and dispossession, and of introduced diseases, from this first wave of colonisation. Hasluck cites early reports:7

One of the earliest reports of the first Resident Magistrate at Roebourne, in 1866...described how numbers of natives were dying from a disease and that their bodies were to be seen lying about the countryside. Another account declared that this ‘smallpox’ ‘carried them off in hundreds if not thousands’ and an early settler in the district, speaking in retrospect in after years, said, ‘We lost one half of them through it’.

Ngarluma people were also among the first in the region to join other Aboriginal people used for the dangerous work of diving in the nascent but rapidly expanding pearling industry. By 1875, just a decade after the establishment of the two towns, 57 pearling vessels were licensed at Cossack and the number of Aboriginal divers employed by them, either voluntarily or by force, was 493.8 Over the same decade, pastoral leases had been granted over most of Ngarluma land and, by the end of the nineteenth century, further inland over much of Yindjibarndi, Kuruma and Bunjima country. The permanent fresh water of Ngarrari was incorporated into Millstream Station as early as 1866. By 1868, within two years of the arrival of the first colonists, almost 1.2 million ha of land had been leased.9

The pastoral industry

The establishment of stations, mainly for running sheep, nevertheless had a less destructive impact on local Aboriginal groups than other forms of settlement, for two main reasons. The first was that the stations were huge and unpopulated other than round the small area of the homestead, and all pastoral leases in Western Australia issued under the Land Regulations of 1864, and subsequently under other land regulations—the Land Act 1898 (WA) and the Land Act 1933 (WA)10—contained a reservation in favour of Aboriginal people. This allowed11 ‘full right to the Aboriginal natives of the said Colony at all times to enter upon

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8 de la Rue (1979: 77).
9 ibid., pp. 23, 24.
10 In fact, the Land Act of 1933 omitted this provision when first enacted. It was amended in 1934 to include the reservation by adding a subsection (2) to Section 106. This ‘window’ for pastoral leases without the reservation became an important issue when the courts came to decide on pastoral leases in native title claims in Western Australia, including in the Ngarluma Yindjibarndi claim that will be dealt with in Chapter 7.
11 Land Regulations 1882, 11th Schedule.
any unenclosed or enclosed but otherwise unimproved part of the [subject land] for the purpose of seeking their subsistence therefrom in their accustomed manner’.

The reservation meant that local groups could still have access to extensive areas of their country for hunting and foraging, and for meetings and ceremony. It did not mean that the early encounter between pastoralists and Aboriginal people was benign. Hasluck characterises it as marked for the European settlers by ‘distrust, intolerance and determination that firm measures were essential’. He supports this view by quoting Walter Padbury, who reached the mouth of the Harding River in 1863 and was granted one of the first pastoral leases in the area: Padbury ‘recounts that when he established his first station in the North-West, “my last words to Charlie Nairne (his manager) when I shook hands with him were, “If you find the natives too troublesome you must shoot at them””.

In later years, his opinion reflected a fairly typical frontier history:

Let the Government have their resident magistrate and such police as they can afford in each district. But the pioneers and outside settlers must and will be the people to fight and subdue the natives, and the question is are we or the natives to be masters? And the sooner that question in each new district is settled, the less bloodshed there will be—the less expense and the greater security to property.

The second circumstance that made the establishment of stations a relatively benign form of settlement was that, in a region that they found isolated, uncertain and very difficult, many of the new settlers realised that, if they were to succeed, they would need the labour of the local Aboriginal people. Their knowledge of the country, their proximity and the government ban on the employment of convicts and ticket-of-leave men north of the Murchison River persuaded the pastoralists to offer food, tobacco and medicine not only to potential workers but also to their extended family groups. In this way, the pastoral culture of the region developed, as elsewhere, with the pastoralists dependent on their Aboriginal workers and with the workers continuing to live with their own groups, maintaining their kin and social relations and obligations, and working on their own country. In the wet season, from around November to February, the quiet work time coincided with traditional ceremonial and social gatherings, and the Aboriginal workers were able to carry

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13 ibid., p. 178.
14 ibid., p. 178.
these out and fulfil their ceremonial and social obligations. For this second reason, too, the development of the pastoral industry in its first century was able to accommodate many aspects of traditional Aboriginal life.

By the 1980s, indeed, the time on the stations was seen by many of the older Roebourne people, as well as by older pastoralists, as something of a golden age—the good old days—when the local pastoralists and their Aboriginal workers and families knew each other, often grew up together and ‘lived in harmony’. I spent time with Alice Smith, a senior Bunjima woman, sitting outside her house in the Village watching kids play in the yard. She remembered:

You know, olden day, you used to have to say, I belong to Rocklea [Station]. I’m Bunjima…It was really good on the station, yeah. When you on the station you can do what you want to do. If you want to work, you know, you can work. If you want a day off, your day off you go down the river or wherever you want to go, hunting…When on the station, we can go where we want to go…That’s what one of my family are trying to do at Rocklea now. All the Rocklea people, what they were talking, you know, they want to get that Rocklea Station so they can get all the old people back to their country, you know, where they come from. And settle down there…We all belong to Rocklea, see…We got a right to that country, all the cemetery there belong to the we fellas’ family, you know, the people, they all there that we know.

Johnny Walker, a senior Yindjibarndi Law man who was born in 1926 on Tambrey Station on the tablelands, recounted to me: ‘I turned out to be head stockman. Before they used to have big mobs, just giving them tucker and a few bob16 a week…When I was the head stockman, we had about 15, 16 working on the station…I been on stations all my life.’

When I met him, Johnny was manager of the three stations near Roebourne—Mount Welcome, Woodbrook and Chirratta—that were owned by Roebourne’s first Aboriginal organisation, Ieramugadu, through a shareholding in the Mount Welcome Pastoral Company. Part of the plan in buying the stations was to use them to train some of the young men in station work and give them the opportunity for involvement in the kind of work that their parents and grandparents had experienced.

While the earlier era of the pastoral industry in the West Pilbara wrought change, including the emergence of a population of mixed descent, it did not radically disrupt traditional life. Nor did it bring with it many aspects of modernisation for Aboriginal people. Instead, it was accompanied by practices that emphasised

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16 Shillings in the pre-decimal currency.
for the colonists an opposition between them and Aboriginal people, especially those whom they defined as full-blood, entrenching Aboriginal people for them in the role, both imagined and actual, of the Other.

There were a number of dimensions to this process. One was political and legislative. Government developed a series of policies that gradually shifted from ‘pacification’ to protection. This took the form of the Aborigines Protection Act of 1896 and the establishment of the Aborigines Protection Board. Money was to be set aside for the benefit of Aborigines, but this was considered to be mainly for the distribution of relief from the depredations of contact in the form of rations and blankets.\(^\text{17}\) In the eyes of the colonists by the end of the nineteenth century, the noble savage had become the poor bugger. Missions and reserves had been established that both conveniently removed Aboriginal people from the land and offered them refuge, though there was no mission presence in the Roebourne region. Even on the stations, where Aboriginal workers had become an integral part of the workforce, the custom of providing rations rather than wages, including rations to their extended families, allowed the pastoralists to see them in the role of dependants. Over 50 years, frontier hostility metamorphosed into paternalism.

Underlying the transformation was an unchanging assumption of innate superiority on the part of the colonists and—despite the friendships that developed among children growing up and playing together on the stations, or among station hands working together mustering, shearing, or in the dust of the stockyards—a sense of essential difference. For the colonists, fuelled by emerging ideas of social evolution, Aboriginal people from the beginning were Other. This was combined with the further colonial assumption of the right to take land and, in Padbury’s words, to ‘fight and subdue the natives’ and to be masters, so that Aboriginal people were cast as the Other in a fixed opposition, justified in terms of racial superiority, between ‘us’ and ‘them’. As Said argues in terms of the relationship between the Occident and the Orient, the relationship established by the colonisers with Aboriginal people was one ‘of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony’.\(^\text{18}\) The colonial way of knowing Aboriginal people was the product of the history of conquest that the colonists themselves had brought about.\(^\text{19}\)

That this was not the way that Aboriginal people in the West Pilbara in the same period saw either themselves or the colonists is indicated paradoxically by their willingness both to do battle and to kill settlers and their stock and, later, to work to a limited extent with and for them. The colonial way of knowing Aboriginal

\(^{17}\) Hasluck (1970: 111).
\(^{18}\) Said (2003: 5).
\(^{19}\) Cf. ibid., pp. 4–5.
people was not initially the Aboriginal way of knowing the colonists. The latter arose inevitably out of the colonial encounter, but the colonial encounter did not define the Aboriginal social or moral universe. Instead of constructing a modality of ‘otherness’, based on a hierarchy of domination and subordination, many local Aboriginal people incorporated the newcomers into their social and moral landscape, firstly as enemy, then as a new group with whom ties of obligation and reciprocity were often developed.

Alice Smith, reflecting on what she had been told by the old people about those early days, saw it this way:

You know, Aborigine people don’t like white people when they first meet up. And they used to fight, kill one another. They shoot the Aborigine people and Aborigine people spear them. And next, they settle down now. When they settle down, Aborigine know this white skin, they got plenty food now, they find out, and to their country. When they like the white people, sent the wife, maybe one night to that person, whitefella, got a lot of food. In the morning they bring back lot of stores of flour and things. That’s how all the half-caste children start off. One night friend, you know, they play the wife, Aborigine people, because they know whitefella’s got plenty food coming from Perth or wherever they come from.

Woodley King, who was born at Millstream and worked on the stations for 30 years, saw the later situation a little differently: ‘White people, they changing, some of them, you know. They like to sit down and talking with Aboriginal people and talking in the land. Different from old-time way. All friend together now. Very shy, you know, Aboriginal people never went near the white people.’

Coppin Dale, born on Croydon Station and a carrier of the Law for Ngarluma people, was in the Roebourne hospital, where I went to see him. He described the relationship: ‘On stations, getting bit of bread, bit of meat. Before, when whites came, Aboriginal people and white like that [holding his index and middle fingers apart]. Now talk together, do things together. Don’t pass each other in the street. Friendly now [his two fingers crossed].’

When Aboriginal workers led by Clancy McKenna, Dooley Bin Bin and non-Aboriginal activist Don McLeod walked off the stations further north and initiated their long-running strike in 1946 for better pay and conditions, Yindjibarndi and Ngarluma workers did not join in. Johnny Walker remembered:

We watched, us mob, watched from Roebourne and up Wittenoom, up that way. We weren’t involved in the strike. Only Port Hedland mob…I
mean, we all Aboriginal people, but we didn’t join in with them. I dunno [if conditions were really bad], not where we were, might’ve been up that way. All right for us.

Some of the mob found other work that kept them on the country. Kuruma man Gordon Lockyer joined the Aboriginal Protection Board in 1953 and worked as a dogger, trapping dingoes all over surrounding stations until well into his retirement.\(^{20}\)

The impact of colonisation on the peoples of the West Pilbara, then, brought change to their social relations and, with the introduction of exotic animals, to the landscape and to their economic environment. At the same time, the effects of this impact were experienced in different ways by different groups. If working on the stations allowed some groups to remain on their own country and maintain their traditional social and ceremonial practices, this was more the case for Yindjibarndi, Bunjima and other inland groups than it was for Ngarluma and other coastal people, although a few stations—including Mount Welcome, Woodbrook and Chirratta—were established on Ngarluma land. A group referred to as Yaburara, who may have been a northern Ngarluma group associated particularly with the Burrup Peninsula and surrounding islands, was effectively wiped out.\(^{21}\) Ngarluma lost important parts of their country, including access to the fresh water of the lower reaches of the Harding River, when the towns of Roebourne and Cossack were built and expanded. Ngarluma people experienced colonisation much more directly as confrontation, loss and separation between themselves and the intruders. This separation was physically incorporated into the town’s development.

The town and the Old Reserve

Established initially to provide services for the pastoral industry, Roebourne also became the administrative centre of the region. At the turn of the century, it was firmly established as a non-Aboriginal town, with solidly built church, bank, courthouse, post office, hospital and three hotels. Cossack, too, linked by tramline to Roebourne in 1888, was a non-Aboriginal town, as was the new settlement of Point Samson where a jetty was built in 1903–04 to supplement the port facilities at Cossack where the harbour was beginning to silt up.\(^{22}\) An early

21 Gara (1983). This was also the court’s finding in the native title determination Daniel v State of Western Australia [2003] FCA 666 (3 June 2003), paras 341, 352, 372–4, Appendix G. Paragraph 1478 of the judge’s reasons states: ‘It is common ground emerging from the submissions that there are no known living descendants of the Yaburara.’ Despite this, a Yaburara and Mardudhunera people native title claim over adjacent land and waters remains extant.
22 de la Rue (1979: 60, 130); Gibson (1971: 55).
presence of Malays, Filipinos, Chinese, Timorese and later Japanese, brought to Roebourne and Cossack by the pearling industry, had all but disappeared by the early 1900s, though they, too, experienced the essentially European character of the towns. In Roebourne, they were segregated ‘in their own shanty town situated to the west of the cemetery’.  

The only Aboriginal presence in Roebourne itself was in domestic service, on the annual race day, or in the court or jail. All prisoners were brought to Roebourne, the district’s legal centre, for trial and, if found guilty, incarcerated in the local prison. Many of these were Aboriginal people from all over the West Pilbara, setting the pernicious framework for the law to define Aboriginal practices, and consequently Aboriginal people, as Other in terms of European hegemony and norms of behaviour. Colonisation on the frontier distorted one of the finest products of modernity, the rule of law, and turned it into an instrument of colonial repression. In 1904, for example, there were 72 Aboriginal prisoners in the jail, some aged as young as fourteen. Aboriginal prisoners, often chained, were used as labour for the construction of public buildings and roads in Roebourne and Cossack, and for general tasks such as sweeping the town streets.

These memories remain powerful for Roebourne people. In 1987, the Wickham Amateur Theatre Society staged a *son et lumière* at the old jail. The jail was built over several years, beginning in 1886, and using local stone, which, according to the background material provided for the performance, ‘was easily available in a time when transport was very difficult and native labour was used to do any rough quarrying necessary’. There were two performances, representing the history of the region. To the disappointment of the organisers, they could get no Aboriginal people to take part, nor were there any in the audience for either performance. One of the men who did not attend explained later that it had been a mistake to use the old jail, it had too much bloody history and too many painful memories for people: ‘Who wants to act the part of one of our old people, with a chain around our neck? Too much shame. I don’t want to look at the past, reopen old wounds.’

A further separation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people was incorporated into the physical layout of Roebourne itself. In the 1930s, an area outside Roebourne was designated for Aboriginal people to live. Over the years, people camped in a number of different sites, which, collectively, came to be known as the Old Reserve. It was separated from the main town by the Harding

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26 Michael Robinson, personal communication.
River. The separation was social as well as spatial; a curfew, in force well into the 1960s, formally excluded Aboriginal people from the town between 6 pm and 6 am. Regulations, announced in a notice at the entrance to the Reserve, required anyone living outside the Reserve to get a permit from the Department of Native Welfare before they could go there.

The population of the Reserve, initially used mainly by Ngarluma people, was swelled by Yindjibarndi and others from the 1940s till it became for a time the largest Native Reserve in Western Australia with around 300 people. The housing provided did not match these numbers; in 1968, when the population fluctuated between 150 and 200, there was a mix of some 15 houses, the same number of huts, and additional tents and temporary bough shelters, together with three ablution blocks. Lighting connected to the town electricity supply was automatically switched off at 10 pm.

The arrangements for schooling reinforced the practical separation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, further emphasising the racial opposition introduced by colonisation and incorporated into daily living in the town. Despite attempts by some of the older people, no school was opened on the Old Reserve and children from the Reserve or from the stations were not permitted to attend the school in Roebourne. Enrolment was available only to non-Aboriginal children or to the children of Aboriginal people who had been granted a certificate of citizenship under the Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act 1944. One of the requirements of the certificate was to satisfy the magistrate that, for two years immediately preceding the date of application, the applicant had ‘dissolved all tribal and native associations except with respect to lineal descendants or native relations of the first degree’. In 1954, the Education Department stated its intention to allow children from the Reserve and from the stations to enrol. There was an outcry from the local non-Aboriginal parents. The result was that a separate primary school was established. Enrolments rose rapidly: 22 children in 1954, 45 in 1957, and 145 in 1959. The only contact between the two schools was for sport on Fridays. It was not until 1961 that a new, combined school for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children was opened. Four years later a hostel, Weeriana, was built to offer accommodation to those Aboriginal children whose families lived away from the town.

Despite the indifferent conditions, and the uncomfortable proximity of different language groups, the Old Reserve was an Aboriginal space. It allowed people to

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29 Biskup (1973: 249).
30 ibid., p. 207.
31 Gibson (1971: 121).
32 Carol Lockyer, in Rijavec and Solomon (2005: Biographies).
live in their traditional family groupings and to maintain to some extent their customary social organisation. This was reflected in the mundane activities and interactions of every day, from eating to playing cards, but included also the ongoing exercise of authority in relation to Law by senior Law men and the performance of ceremony by those able to attend as and when necessary to fulfil the Law. People coming in from the stations for supplies or, after Weeriana was opened, to drop off or collect their children at the beginning and end of school terms, stayed on the Reserve. With a decline in the pastoral industry in the 1960s, more of these families became permanent residents. Alice Smith described what happened for her family:

I come to Roebourne in 1969. That’s when I come from the station. We been 20 years out on the station working. My husband used to be contract fencing and building yards for the station, if the station want a yard or a fence. And he used to go round putting a fence up and that. And we come around Mulga Down way now, all round Mount Florence, Coolawanyah. And that’s when I had the last one mine, when he was two years old I come down to Roebourne. Because my children was in the hostel then, and I asked my husband could I get a house in Roebourne and settle down with the kids, when the new hostel was built. So we come up, get a house in here then.

The time when Alice and her husband, Jack, settled in Roebourne coincided with a number of major changes in the region that, together, created the context in which modernisation for Roebourne Aboriginal people could be characterised by Yilbie Warrie in 1987 as grog, disease and death. These were the years that completed the alienation of traditional lands, thereby fracturing the relationship between present and past, and most deeply altering their customary social and moral framework. This was the time of the second colonisation.

Mining and modernisation: The second colonisation, 1965–1980

Construction and urbanisation

The local experience of modernisation, and the ‘big problem’ referred to by Yilbie, came with the second colonisation. This second wave hit the region with

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34 I owe the reference to the beginning of the iron-ore boom of the 1960s as the second colonisation to Bob Hart, who lived and served in Roebourne as a Department of Community Welfare officer for some 15 years through the 1970s and 1980s.
the devastating force of one of the worst of the annual cyclones. The Pilbara is immensely rich in iron ore and other minerals. Small-scale mining had been established as early as the 1870s with copper and, later, gold. Local Aboriginal people themselves undertook sporadic alluvial mining—yandying—and were involved in the loading and carting of blue asbestos from Wittenoom through Roebourne to the coast.\textsuperscript{35}

But when the Federal Government lifted its ban on the export of iron ore in 1961, the big mining companies and their construction workers moved in, many of them to the caravan park in Roebourne. Maureen Whitby, a non-Aboriginal woman who grew up in Roebourne, described what it was like:

\begin{quote}
All of a sudden we were invaded by about 5000 men. It was just men everywhere. They were flying them in here for the Hamersley Iron railway line by the DC4 load, straight from Queensland. We never saw a TI [Thursday Islander] in our life before till all these black people started jumping off the aeroplane. They just flew them straight in because they’re the best railway workers. And they built that Hamersley Iron one in record time.
\end{quote}

Within a decade, 10 new towns, four new railways, hundreds of kilometres of roads and pipeline, and three new deepwater ports were constructed in the Pilbara generally. Three of the new towns—Dampier, Karratha and Wickham—were on Ngarluma country. Dampier, developed by Hamersley Iron, and Wickham, built a few years later by Cliffs Robe River on land excised from the Mount Welcome pastoral lease, were closed mining towns, with accommodation and services available only to company employees. Karratha, excised from Karratha Station, was established as an open town, but almost all its residents were non-Aboriginal.

The Victoria Hotel in Roebourne—the Vic—the only pub within a hundred-mile radius until the new towns were fully established,\textsuperscript{36} boomed. An ABC program for \textit{This Day Tonight} in 1972 reported:\textsuperscript{37} ‘The Victoria Hotel eighteen months ago employed three people behind the bar and struggled to sell forty barrels of beer a week. Now it has fifteen full time bar staff and its bulk beer sales put it among the top five hotels in the state.’

\textsuperscript{35} There has only recently been any attempt to assess the long-term impact of blue asbestos on these men, but also on the people who were then children, as the bags of asbestos were stored in an open area in Roebourne that children walked through, and often played in, on their way to and from school. In 2006, the National Health and Medical Research Council funded a program on the effects of asbestos exposure in Aboriginal people from Roebourne and Baryugal. Its chief investigator was Professor Richard Murray from James Cook University. In Roebourne, the project partnered with Mawarnkarra, the Aboriginal health service.

\textsuperscript{36} Johnston (1991: 287).

\textsuperscript{37} Rijavec and Solomon (2005).
This was in a town that the 1961 Census showed to have a population of 568 non-Aboriginal people. The number did not include the fluctuating population of the Old Reserve, as Aboriginal people were not counted in the census until after the Commonwealth referendum of 1967.

Drinking rights

The impact of the rapidity and scale of these developments was compounded for local Aboriginal groups by a number of further changes. One of these concerned what Roebourne people refer to as drinking rights. Beginning in 1843, it had been an offence under the Licensing Act for Aboriginal people in ‘proclaimed areas’ to supply or receive alcohol. This changed for the West Pilbara in November 1966 when a government proclamation removed the prohibition. At the same time as the construction workers were inundating the Vic, Aboriginal people from the Old Reserve and from the stations were also permitted into the bars and to take alcohol away for the first time. The novelty of being able to share in an aspect of Australian life from which they had been legally excluded and that had come to represent equality proved overwhelming. Old man Coppin Dale gave his meaning to the experience: ‘Why drink? Made the people happy. Have a few drinks, then start to talk.’ For many, alcohol entered their understanding of a good life.

This was not how younger people growing up in Roebourne at this time saw the situation. Roger Solomon, son of a Ngarluma father and an Yindjibarndi mother, was twelve in the early stages of these changes. In his narration for the film Exile and the Kingdom, he described it this way:

> Thousands of single men flooded in to build the railways and towns for Hamersley Iron, but Roebourne was not ready for the boom and couldn’t cope with it. There were more construction workers living in Roebourne’s caravan parks than in the town itself, and after work hundreds of them came to town to let off steam in the pub. Our community just fell apart, everything fell apart.

Even Alice Smith, who chose to move into Roebourne at this time, described it later to Commissioner Johnston during the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody:

> In 1969 Roebourne was just starting to get worse because of alcohol. The new towns started from 1960 up to now. The first was Dampier,
the bad one for the Aborigine people. All the working people...used to come and drink here at this pub, Thursday Islander people, Yugoslav people and whatever. And the Aboriginal people started more and more to make friends with them, drinking with them, going in their cars, getting killed, all that started. All the Aboriginal people thought that was good, being with those people, drinking, going around in cars with them, girls especially. It was especially bad for the girls, more than the men. But the men got really drunk here, would go staggering away along the road and get hit by cars and pick fights with each other, things like that. Alcohol is the problem we've got...Even the new generation coming on. When they finish school they've got nothing to do because they haven't got work to go for...All they do is go drinking with their Mum and Dad down the street, getting drunk and some of them getting killed. It's the young people we are losing.

Another woman described the impact of alcohol as 'like [being] trapped in a big spider web'. Other women—although few wished to talk about this period—sometimes referred to these years as a time of fear, when as girls they were afraid to walk by themselves, even during the day, and they have stories of harassment and, in some instances, rape. Roger Solomon mourned the many people of his generation who had been lost because of alcohol.

Other people who had worked and lived on the stations were also affected. More Yindjibarndi and some Bunjima and Kuruma families moved onto the Old Reserve. For some, this was as early as the 1950s. For others, it happened as work in the pastoral industry declined. This was a complex process, including as the result of drought and mechanisation, as well as an increasing unionisation of workers from which Aboriginal people were excluded. A permanent move off the stations and into Roebourne and other towns was accelerated after 1 December 1968, when the decision of the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission to award equal pay to Aboriginal pastoral workers, first in the Northern Territory and then by extension to the States, came into effect; many pastoralists either refused or were unable to meet the necessary extra costs.

42 Edmunds (1989: 10).
43 Rijavec and Solomon (2005).
44 Michael Robinson, personal communication.
45 Rowley (1972b: Chs 14 and 15, especially pp. 345–8). The extension of the award from the Northern Territory to the States was made possible by the 1967 Referendum, which altered the Constitution to give the Commonwealth power to make laws for Aboriginal people (s. 51 [xxvil]).
The Village

This move away from country represented not only a further dislocation for Yindjibarndi, as well as for those Ngarluma who had continued to work on the surrounding stations, and for the other groups. It also put increasing pressure on the already grossly inadequate housing in the Old Reserve. In an attempt to address these conditions, and the concerns of people living on the Reserve, the State Housing Commission (Homeswest) undertook sporadic consultations with people in 1973 about moving them into Roebourne itself. The move was fiercely opposed by the non-Aboriginal residents. One of them described how ‘the whole town was up in arms opposing it and a committee was formed to oppose it’. The consultations came to an abrupt end when Cyclone Chloe wrought extensive damage to the Reserve housing at the beginning of 1975. The physical separation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people experienced on the Reserve was replaced with the rapid relocation of Reserve families to ‘the Village’, the new Homeswest housing in the town. As had happened with Asian residents more than 70 years before, the Village was separated from the rest of the town by the cemetery.

This separation remained even when the administrative centre for the shire had moved to Karratha in 1971, as, over the next few years, did services and many of the non-Aboriginal residents. Despite ongoing maintenance of the distinction between its Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents—government officers, health and hospital workers, police, hotel staff, shopkeepers—Roebourne was transformed in a very few years from a non-Aboriginal to a largely Aboriginal town, expanding the distinction to one between Roebourne and all the new towns in the shire. The new towns were for those working for the mining companies or involved in servicing them. The effective exclusion of local Aboriginal people from the extensive employment opened up in the region identified Roebourne as a welfare town. The region's minerals boom brought new industry, new employment, new towns and new ports. But not to local Aboriginal people.

At the same time, anecdotal accounts suggest that the move from the Old Reserve to the Village altered the informal living arrangements that had to some extent reflected the traditional relationships within and between different groups. The allocation of housing in the Village removed those choices. People were allocated according to Homeswest criteria that bore no relation to customary arrangements. Nor did the Village have the autonomy of the Reserve in terms of its being an effective Aboriginal space. Its greater proximity to the town, its incorporation as a bureaucratic entity, the greater visibility of its residents and their behaviours to the police meant a much more constant interaction with non-Aboriginal people and, more significantly, a much more regular intrusion of non-Aboriginal institutional processes and demands.
Rupture

The second colonisation, therefore, while it arrived without the guns and chains of the first, nevertheless constituted an even greater assault on the lifestyle and on the traditional values and beliefs of Roebourne Aboriginal people. Their threshold experience of modernity was an experience of marginalisation. The advent of large-scale mining and urbanisation in the West Pilbara was, in a sense, a triumph of rationality, stripped through its assertion of power of any moral responsibility for its effects on the Aboriginal inhabitants. When Hamersley Iron began the development of its mines and of the towns of Dampier and Tom Price, there was no legislative requirement for them to concern themselves with anything outside the legality of the leases and permissions that they had been granted by the State Government. The first legislative protection in Western Australia for any Aboriginal sites as distinct from Aboriginal people, or land reserved for their use and benefit under the Land Act 1933, was the Aboriginal Heritage Act in 1972. This came too late to soften the impact of the first wave of development.

For the factory workers in Bangkok and the nuns in Spain, modernisation over this same period created a fracture between the present and the past, but access to a wide range of core cultural meanings remained available to them. Colonisation as experienced in Roebourne actively denied people their past by alienating them from their country. In so doing, it removed their economic base, as well as the source of their social and moral vision and practice. The consequence for Roebourne people was a distortion of the coherent connection between moral evaluation of the good and the social practices—embodied in family and kin, in deep knowledge of country, in subsistence activities, and ceremonial ritual—designed to express and promote a good life.

This raised for people the question of culture loss. Stuart Kirsch, examining the impact of nuclear testing by the United States in the Marshall Islands, comments:

46 Whereas local histories were once intimately associated with the landscape, the destruction of the places where these events occurred has prompted these communities to reformulate their narratives of the past in chronological terms...The notion of loss has two primary registers. It may refer to possession—to the objects or property for which one might claim rights or ownership...In other contexts...it is possible to speak of loss in relation to the notion of kinship and belonging rather than possession...

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The dynamics of memory and forgetting, the entropic tendencies of ritual knowledge, and the incompleteness of the intergenerational transmission of knowledge all pose questions about the possibility of loss.

For people like Gordon Lockyer, who continued to travel his country as a dogger, this sense of loss was immediate. Open-cut mining followed the course of the Robe River, damaging the surrounding hills: ‘these ghost hills that he could no longer show to his children and grandchildren, that belonged now only to the country of his mind’. The huge mine at Mount Tom Price engulfed a rich deposit of red ochre that had been important not only for local ceremony, but also as an item of trade across the region.

Roebourne people also expressed their sense of loss in terms of loss of knowledge. They talked about this with reference to the passing away of the old people who held the knowledge, anxiety about and among the middle generation having only incomplete knowledge, and concern about learning more before it was too late and about passing knowledge on to the next generations. A Ngarluma woman recounted: ‘I was brought up like white people. We was on the station. I don’t know about the old ways. I’m Ngarluma, but I don’t know my skin colour… I think it’s sad, not to know my culture, the old stories. I don’t have this.’

In the period of rapid development from the 1960s, Roebourne people’s dialogue with the past is complex and shifting. For many, especially in the early years, modernisation meant only loss: loss of country, loss of tradition, loss of knowledge, and often loss of family members because of alcohol. Nor did they find solace in modernity’s orientation to the future, which seemed to demand a rejection of the past, with a promise of the break between present and past being reconstructed as ‘forever new “new beginnings”…dismantling old structures and building new ones from scratch’, recapitulating ‘the break brought about with the past as a continuous renewal’. The responses in Roebourne—and also in Bangkok and Madrid—suggest that too drastic a break between present and past is experienced in the first instance by those whom it affects as breakdown, not renewal; that it shatters the base on which people have built their systems of meanings and values, leaving them without a framework.

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48 ‘Skin’ is the colloquial term used throughout Australia to refer to a form of traditional social organisation of larger descent groups that allocates people on the basis of their parentage into sections or subsections. Central and West Pilbara people are organised into four skin groups or sections. An individual belongs to one of these subgroups, or skin groups, on the basis of descent through either father or mother. Skin groups determine many of the ways in which people relate to each other. In traditional law, this includes marriage.
50 Habermas (2002: 7).
51 Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, EZLN spokesman, quoted in Zapatista, [Documentary], Big Noise Films. Quoted in Rijavec (2005: 19).
a past does not exist…and has no future…A people without a history cannot advance…cannot exist as a people because in one way or another, the past is what makes you construct the present.’

Continuity and innovation

Nevertheless, despite these drastic changes, they were played out in a particular cultural universe.\textsuperscript{52} There were continuities to Aboriginal life, generally out of sight of the non-Aboriginal residents of the new towns and even in Roebourne itself. These continuities were low-key, an undercurrent, carried on in the interstices of daily living. Yindjibarndi people continued to carry out Law ceremonies at Millstream.\textsuperscript{53} For others, there was a break of probably only two years, from 1969 to 1971. Ceremonies were performed, sometimes on the Old Reserve, often at bush meetings over the hot season, later at Woodbrook Station after it had been purchased for local groups, though never in the Village. They included initiation for boys. David Walker, one of the middle generation of Ngarluma leaders, explained in 1987:

This is still important, the bush meeting; it takes place every year. Roebourne still takes a big part. Before, people used to stick to their own place. Now, they’ve opened up the ground, can go as friends. Man’s one is at Christmas, or maybe in the August holidays. There was a big meeting in 1975 in Wittenoom, called by the parents of some boys. That opened it all up. People came from Jigalong, La Grange, from all around. When they come from other places, they do it the way the local people want. When we go to their place, we do it their way.

The old people have passed it on. Now it’s our generation, we’ve learnt it from them, we’re teaching it to the young people.

At the same time, the Aboriginal way of life with its own independent culture and social practices could no longer be taken for granted, even by Aboriginal people themselves. One of the effects of colonisation was the ‘self-consciousness of culture’, but also its resistance to complete annihilation.\textsuperscript{54} In the face of the assault of rapid change through the 1960s and 1970s, this was initially inchoate and adventitious. As David Walker indicated, even bush meetings had changed to take account of the new circumstances in which people found themselves.

There were new ways, too, in which people struggled to come to terms with the enormity of change and to make sense of their own place within it. This involved finding new meanings and new ways of acting, often in the form

\textsuperscript{52} Cf. Sahlins (2005: 52).
\textsuperscript{53} Michael Robinson, personal communication.
\textsuperscript{54} Sahlins (2005: 48).
of a reaction to the ubiquitousness of drinking. One expression was through Christianity, despite the previous absence of any established mission. In 1969, a group of senior men, both Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi, worked with Pastor Dave Stevens to establish the Pilbara Aboriginal Church. This was part of a Pentecostal denomination, the Apostolic Church of Australia. Its members felt no contradiction between traditional beliefs and those of Christianity. Woodley King explained that he saw ‘Mingala’ as both an ancestral being and the Christian God. Gordon Lockyer expressed this easy dualism: ‘Burndud [Law ceremony], given to Aboriginal people by God, Mingala. Our own God. But now we’re Christians. Believe two ways. Good.’

The church became a vehicle for men and women to stop drinking; in Roebourne, as in many other Aboriginal communities, people came to make a distinction between being a drinker and being a Christian. It was a mainly Christian group who rejected the move to the Village and the easy availability of alcohol. They moved instead to the old shearers’ quarters, the Woolshed, on Mount Welcome Station, about 3 km out of Roebourne. The first to use the old Woolshed buildings were Jacob Scroggins, a Ngarluma man, and his family. Renamed Cheeditha, it was begun as a dry community—no alcohol permitted—and continued under the leadership of Yilbie Warrie, Kenny Jerrold and Allan Jacobs. All three were leaders in the church. They were also senior Yindjibarndi Law men. And they, with others like Coppin Dale, were active in the establishment in 1973 of the Mount Welcome Pastoral Company, when the Mount Welcome and Chirratta stations were purchased (Woodbrook was added later), and, in 1974, of Ieramugadu Group Incorporated. Ieramugadu was the first legally incorporated Aboriginal organisation in Roebourne and the sole shareholder in the Mount Welcome Pastoral Company. Ieramugadu was also the partner in Hamersley Iron’s first attempts to set up a program to provide employment for Roebourne Aboriginal people.

Women were involved in each of these initiatives. They also undertook others that they saw as allowing Aboriginal people to make their own place in the new order. A number of those who had previously worked on the stations became involved as Homemakers. This was an organisation that had begun in Roebourne at the time when people still lived on the Old Reserve. At the beginning, all its workers were non-Aboriginal women and their task was to provide family support to the Reserve community, and then to assist with the move to the Village.55 They were then joined by Aboriginal women. One of these was Alice Smith:

55 Discussion with then long-term Roebourne resident Betty Connell, who had started as a Homemaker.
I got a little bit of a job for a while, just cleaning the shop. I was in the shop then, that 4-Square now. And then I got the Homemaker job. I was a Homemaker working in the Village then. And I got the licence, drive the car then. I was working eight years in Homemakers.

Funny thing happened with the Village. I thought, when they put the Village up, I thought they were going to be European and Aborigine people mixed up, y’know. But they done a very wrong thing. They let all the Aborigine people just living in the Village one side. And when I first come there and they was damaging, you know, everything finished, all our houses, and they don’t know how to look after the houses. We had to teach them how to keep the house, and how to pay them bills and things like that. They were going good when they had a Homemaker working.

Over the same period, Wendy Hubert, an Yindjibarndi woman, joined the Health Workers program. She saw this as the first step in her ongoing activities in the community:

It was an education for me. I’ve seen a lot of things come and a lot of things change. I was raised in Onslow, went to school in Derby at the UAM [United Aboriginal Mission], I had two years in high school. The parents of the tribal children haven’t been educated in the white people’s way. We’ve got the power in the Aboriginal way but not the white-man way. We’ve got to be educated to get on that spot.

Colonisation and surveillance

These early attempts by Roebourne people to take back some control and to engage with their changing world remained subject, however, and subjected to external forces of ongoing colonisation. One of the most visible of these was the police. To look at just one point over these years, in 1986, there were 10 police officers stationed in the town: two sergeants, six constables and two Aboriginal police aides. The total population of Roebourne was around 1700. The 1986 Census identified 786 of these as Aboriginal. This meant that there was one police officer for every 170 inhabitants, and one to every 79 Aboriginal residents. In the neighbouring company town of Wickham, there were four police officers for a population of some 2500 people, a ratio of one police officer to every 625 people, which the local sergeant-in-charge regarded as too high. In Karratha, there were 10 police for around 10 000 people: one for every 1000.\(^{56}\)

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This level of police presence in Roebourne involved a degree of constant surveillance that effectively encompassed the whole Aboriginal population. Every year over this period some 2000 cases were brought before the magistrate. In 1984, 1975 adult charges and 169 children’s charges were laid; in 1985, 1991 adult and 233 children’s charges; in 1986, 2181 adult and 169 children’s charges.\(^{57}\) In Western Australia more generally, a census of prisoners during these years showed that, on a given day, one out of every 10 nineteen-year-old Aboriginal people in the State was in prison.\(^{58}\) A study examining two periods in Roebourne in 1983 showed that virtually all of the people arrested in Roebourne were Aboriginal. The people arrested were reasonably young: 15 per cent under twenty years old and 56 per cent under thirty. Drunkenness and offences related to licensed premises accounted for more than three-quarters of the offences. The figures also showed a very high level of repeat offenders: 2.45 over three months.\(^{59}\)

This was the context in which a fight took place outside the Victoria Hotel between police, who were off duty and had also been drinking, and a number of Aboriginal men on the night of 28 September 1983. By the end of the fight, five of the Aboriginal men had been arrested and were taken to the Roebourne police station. One of them was a young Yindjibarndi man, John Pat. The consequences were to prove devastating.

**Death of John Pat**

Within an hour of being locked into one of the police station cells, John Pat was found dead. It was a month before his seventeenth birthday. A coronial inquest found that he had died of a closed head wound. The post-mortem examination also found ‘many other injuries, including some significant injuries’\(^{60}\) that extended to two broken ribs and a torn aorta, the major blood vessel leading from the heart.\(^{61}\) John Pat’s death, erupting out of the deepest fissure arising from colonisation in Australia, reverberated in the town, in the State, and eventually in the nation. It gave Roebourne national notoriety, with intense media focus on drunkenness, dysfunction and violence. But it also proved to be a critical culmination of 20—or indeed 120—years of dislocation in the region and of difference interpreted in terms of race; it was a moment of truth for the broader society in terms of its own claims as a good society.

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57 ibid., p. 95.
59 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1990 Regional Research Papers COM/5, WA.
These claims were tested when the coroner committed the five police officers—Constables Terence Holl, Steven Bordas, Ian Armit, James Young and Aboriginal police aide Michael Walker—to stand trial in the Supreme Court of Western Australia for the manslaughter of John Pat. The trial was held in early 1984 in Karratha before a jury of all non-Aboriginal people. In May, the five police were acquitted and reinstated. None, except for Michael Walker, returned to duty in Roebourne, and he was transferred later to another town. Nevertheless, the fact of the trial—if not either the process or its outcome—was a muted signal that it was possible for the rule of law to be practised in support of Aboriginal people and not only as a tool of colonisation. The associated debate, at both State and national levels, invoked the language of rights and situated itself in the context of international law and standards.

Locally, the shire responded by building a community centre, a building generally referred to, because of its hexagonal shape, as the 50-cent hall, which was its sop to the lack of community and recreational facilities in the town. The WA Government set up a Special Cabinet Committee on Aboriginal/Police and Community Relations in 1984 and set out a three-stage program. The first stage was a study of Aboriginal/police relations in the Pilbara. Its central aim was to formulate proposals for improving the working relationships between Aboriginal people and the police in the Pilbara, particularly with respect to Jigalong—another Aboriginal community—and Roebourne. Stage two, the Roebourne Research Project, began in December 1986 and ran until mid 1987. With coordination by community worker Gail Dawson, the team was made up of local Aboriginal people: Marion Cheedy, Nicole Cook, Cecil Parker, Sue Parker, Chrissie Tittums and Greg Tucker. The team worked closely with the new Sergeant-in-Charge, Ron Court.

Stage three was a review of the Roebourne project. The review observed:

Less than a quarter of the initiatives were directed at changing aspects of the law enforcement system...None of [the] six initiatives resulted in any real changes to the system. They were either blocked by some external agency, dropped through a lack of perceived demand, or politely listened to and then ignored.

Therefore, any improvements in Aboriginal/police relations resulting from the project were the outcome of what happened to individual police and Aborigines rather than to changes in the system. Unfortunately this means there is a risk that when the current officers leave Roebourne the

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62 Roberts et al. (1986).
63 ibid., p. 2.
64 Dawson (1987).
65 Jewell et al. (1988: 81).
benefits of the project will go with them. The Aboriginal community is aware of that prospect and is apprehensive about what a new set of police might bring.

Nevertheless, three months after the end of the Roebourne project, a serious attempt was made to bring changes to the law-enforcement system. After much campaigning by Aboriginal and other concerned groups both at the State level and nationally, and after a number of further deaths in custody in different parts of the country, the Commonwealth Government established the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. It was anticipated that the work of the Commission would take about twelve months. In the event, it took four years to examine the individual cases of the 99 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whom it found to have died in the nine years between 1 January 1980 and 31 May 1989 in the custody of prison, police, or juvenile detention institutions. The Commission's mandate was also broadened to look at the issues underlying these deaths.

Commissioner Elliott Johnston investigated the death of John Pat. He acknowledged that 'John Pat's death at the age of sixteen in the lockup of the Roebourne Police Station was one of the major catalysts behind national and international demands for a Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody'. He sat in Roebourne for 35 days between March and May 1990, and took a further 15 days of evidence in Perth. Very early in his report, he pointed out that the jury who tried the issues in the trial of the officers necessarily were examining one aspect of the night’s events. The only issue for them was whether they were satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that the five officers, or any one or more of them, unlawfully killed John Pat. The verdict of not guilty reflects the answer to that narrow question only.

Commissioner Johnston went on to say: 'The inquiry into the death of John Pat was the most lengthy of all the inquiries conducted by the Commission [there were more than 5000 pages of transcript] and one of the most factually contentious… The evidence was complex and generally marked by contradiction.’ Nevertheless, on the basis of that evidence, he did not ‘accept Holl’s evidence as to what happened in the bottleshop’ (where the confrontation took place between Holl and Ashley James that sparked the fight). 'I cannot accept what he says happened outside the shop.' The Commissioner also found that, when

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67 ibid., p. 23.
68 ibid., p. 24.
69 ibid., p. 125.
the five arrested men were taken in vans to the police station, ‘on any view of
the evidence [the police] were guilty of lack of care’; that ‘there was an absolute
preponderance of police power at the time the prisoners were unloaded from
the vans’; that ‘it is nothing short of disgraceful that three of the five prisoners
ended up on the ground’; that ‘Holl was the main offender and that Bordas
played a lesser role’.

Commissioner Johnston recognised the grief occasioned in Roebourne by John
Pat’s death, but also by the Commission’s hearings nearly seven years later. In
his report, he quotes part of the statement from Mavis Pat, John Pat’s mother:

‘When I heard about the Royal Commission…I used to wish it would come
here…[But] I’m sick of the Royal Commission, it’s taking a long time. I wish it to
be over. I wish something to happen soon.’

For people in Roebourne, the wheels of the law ground very, very small, and
intrusively at the day-to-day level, and very, very slowly beyond this, often
losing the connection between cause and effect. What people saw as important
was how they related to the police on a day-to-day basis. The Roebourne
Research Project was immediate, and people had time for Sergeant Ron Court
and his wife. The death of John Pat was too painful for it to be the focus of
public anger among those who were related to him and for whom he was part
of their social world. It was the fourth anniversary of his death soon after I
arrived in Roebourne in 1987. I found that no-one wanted to talk about it. Most
people, in common with traditional custom, avoided speaking his name. One
man responded, ‘That touches too deep. We don’t want to talk about that boy.’
Another couple commented, ‘Ah, that was a terrible thing. But people don’t
want to talk about it any more. Of course they remember it, we never forget
something like that. But what can we do? Mavis Pat, she got no money, no car,
nothing. What can she do?’ One of the new policemen in town responded:

It’s the media that’s done it, drummed up all this business. I had a
phone call just a couple of weeks ago…They’d heard, police under
siege, carrying arms, because of the John Pat anniversary. All not true.
Nothing happened all day. We sat out the front and had a barbecue.

Frank Rijavec, who had arrived in Roebourne with his partner, Noeline
Harrison, a few months earlier than I had, proposing the idea of making a film
with the community received a similar response:

Initially I proposed that the film hinge on the death of John Pat in police
custody and examine the role of police in the town and the fraught

\[70 \text{ ibid., pp. 199, 202, 203.}
\[71 \text{ ibid., p. 37.}
\[72 \text{ Rijavec (2005: 7).} \]
relationships between police and the community; that it be a tract about social justice. Community leaders I discussed the project with (including Alan Jacob, Roger Solomon, Woodley King, Violet Samson and David Daniels) made it clear that they were not interested in dragging their community over the same ground the mass media had been digging: the death of John Pat, relations between police and the community, dysfunction and substance abuse, etc. They set another direction.

The resulting documentary, *Exile and the Kingdom*, became a powerful statement by Roebourne people about how they saw the world in which they found themselves, what they saw as the important values, how they defined the good, and what they saw as essential to a good life for themselves and the next generations. This not only gave them a voice:

Ultimately the production, in collaboration with the community, of the documentary *Exile and the Kingdom*, from July 1987 through 1993, provided elders and the community with a radical contrast to the powerlessness and victimisation they felt at the hands of the media. It gave the community a voice in a way they had not before experienced.

It also reflected the growing confidence of people in setting out their own terms for a dialogue with modernity. Commissioner Johnston’s report on the death of John Pat began with a statement from Yilbie Warrie:

Roebourne is a very significant place for Aboriginal people. This is a place where Aboriginal law was made for all Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal people are now suffering. They are sick in the heart. We need assistance to overcome the problems that have come since Europeans came here. We want the Royal Commission to help us with our ideas.

What this statement did not reflect, though the point was taken up later in the Commission’s report, was the extent to which, even from the early 1980s, people in Roebourne had started to reconnect their present with their past, and with the meanings from the past that could allow them to deal better with the present and move into a different future.

A commentary on a different moment of disaster, that of the Blitz in London in 1940, when the familiar world was destroyed, can equally be applied to Roebourne people over the whole period, particularly that of the second colonisation: ‘People do what people have to do in the face of a disaster. They do what they can to get things back to normal. The strength of people was not understood…Ordinary people endure extraordinary things.’

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73 ibid., p. 9.
74 Johnston (1991: 1).
75 *The Blitz: London’s Firestorm*, ABC1 Television, 26 March 2006.
This is what people in Roebourne were doing through the 1980s as they began to recover from the assault of modernisation, from a basis described by Wendy Hubert: ‘I reckon the tribal system is much better, if you’ve got the knowledge and the patience…We’ve got the power in the Aboriginal way…We got the power. We feel ourselves, we feel it. We feel it, and where does it come from?’

By 1990, this power was being exercised in diverse ways. One was a move towards putting in place joint management arrangements between Aboriginal people and national park management agencies. It arose from a discussion by the Aboriginal representatives at a Conservation and Land Management meeting held at Millstream in 1990 and was subsequently included in the Royal Commission’s National Report as Recommendation 315.  

Enduring extraordinary things: The strength of people

The first Aboriginal organisations in Roebourne set up to claim a legitimate place in their changing world were the Mount Welcome Pastoral Company and Jeramugadu. These were established in 1973 and 1974. They gave Ngarluma people legal access back to parts of their country and all Roebourne groups a place, Woodbrook, where ceremony could take place. Jeramugadu also played an active role in working with Hamersley Iron to develop a program to provide some employment opportunities for Roebourne people. More organisations began to be established in the early 1980s.

The Ngurin Resource Centre, named after the Aboriginal word for the Harding River (Ngurin) that runs through the town, was set up in 1985 in the wake of a controversy over the Harding Dam that I will look at in the next chapter. Wendy Hubert was its chair and it worked actively with the Aboriginal Sites Department of the WA Museum to protect Aboriginal sites in the area. Ngarluma leaders David Daniel and David Walker were both involved in this process and both accepted positions with the Museum. In the same year, Mawarnkarra, an Aboriginal Medical Service, was established. Woodley King was finally able to set up a community on Yindjibarndi land at Ngurrawaana. He did this with the help of two Sisters of Mercy from Perth, Sister Bernadine and Sister Bernadette, who, like the nuns in Spain, had embraced the possibility of change offered by Vatican II, and of Father John Gerharty, who organised an essential truck for the community through Catholic Relief. Violet Samson worked with others to organise the Gurra Bunjya cultural camp, known colloquially as the Kids Culture Camp, for young people. David Daniel, Roger Solomon and others set up the Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Dance Group.

Alice Smith reflected:

76 Lawrence (1996–97).
What we got, we started in Roebourne. When I first come to Roebourne, nothing was here, nothing belonged to the Aborigines. Aborigines had nothing, really nothing, no stations. Then we got Chirratta, Mount Welcome and Woodbrook, that’s the first one, and Ieramugadu, that’s the first one, alright? We started, and I started now, Aborigines started to work for welfare, work for my people in the Village…

You see this one now [the Village Hall]? We brought that here, we bring it up here. That’s where the kindergarten used to be down at the river. Because we wanted that hall for the meetings for the people, you know, all the Village people…

And after, Cheeditha started, that one there. Aborigine people got that now. From that, we put in for this Mawarnkarra now. We had a meeting, in December, we tell all the people we want that Mawarnkarra Medical Service, so they got to come up here. And then Woodley King got some place up at Njurrawaana. And we got Ngurin now. Lotta changes come after that…Everything change now, that’s really good. Aborigine… know they got their place for themselves.

Alice’s niece Eva Black, who was working as the education assistant at the Roebourne Primary School in 1987, had moved to Roebourne from Onslow in 1980. She commented, ‘I really enjoy living up here, it’s really good.’ She was involved in the school’s culture classes: ‘When the kids tell the story, they usually tell it in Yindjibarndi. I write it down for them, in Yindjibarndi. We’ve got a dictionary now…And we’ve got Greg Tucker as our liaison officer.’

When I arrived in Roebourne in 1987, I came with reports echoing in my head about disaster, dysfunction, cultural loss and the received wisdom about the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal people having resulted in low self-esteem. That was not how I experienced the people whom I met there. There were certainly problems, and alcohol remained one of them. But I met people who were secure and confident. Woodley King made clear to me that I stood in a relationship to him of naive newcomer. I twice put myself in the position of being chastised by him. Both were on the basis of my erroneous acceptance of the view that time was not important for Aboriginal people. When I arrived late for an interview with him in Roebourne, he tapped his wristwatch and pointed out that I had not arrived at the agreed time. The second time was when I had arranged with him to go out to Njurrawaana. I was late leaving Millstream with Carol Lockyer and the children and found very daunting the prospect of a further long drive along the pipeline road there and, more worryingly, back in the dark. We didn’t go, and I found myself having to respond to Woodley’s reprimand the next time we met with apologies and lame excuses.
As Alice Smith commented:

Since I come here, I seen a change come for the white people. Also the white people getting good to the Aborigine people, you know, and some of the white people help them. But some of the white lady and the man, they still not right with the Aborigine people, because they different colour. I think they go by that. But we, Aborigine people, we know we all the same, doesn’t matter what sort of colour you got, black or white. We all got the same blood. We’re not different. All we different is the colour might be white, some of them black.
Map 4. Pilbara native title applications and determination areas, 30 June, 2012

Source: The National Native Title Tribunal (used with permission).