In April 1929 two airmen, Keith Anderson and Bobby Hitchcock, died of thirst next to their airplane ‘Kookaburra’ at 17°56’S 131°58’E in the Northern Territory. They had hurriedly flown from Sydney in their Westland Widgeon II to join the massive air search the authorities had mounted to locate the famous aviator Charles Kingsford Smith, who had made a forced landing in the Kimberley and was out of radio contact. On the leg from Alice Springs to Wyndham, Anderson and Hitchcock, old friends of Kingsford Smith, made a forced landing and perished. Their bodies were buried at the site by Flight-Lieutenant Charles Eaton’s expedition soon afterward. In May-June 1929 another expedition using a Thornycroft truck recovered the bodies, but their scheme to tow the aeroplane back to an area of European settlement proved impossible. For almost fifty years ‘Kookaburra’ was considered ‘lost’ by non-Aboriginal Australians but in 1978 the airframe was at last recovered after being located by a well-publicised expedition organised by the entrepreneur Dick Smith.1

The whereabouts of ‘Kookaburra’ had remained a puzzle despite a series of expeditions by European Australians. Evidence for this uncertainty is provided by two official map names, Kookaburra and Eaton,2 both outside the area they are meant to commemorate. Kookaburra is too far to the southeast, while Eaton is south of the forced landing site although it extends into the southern limits of areas covered during searches for the aircraft, including the contemporary search conducted by Charles Eaton.

Indeed, because of the featureless terrain and the demanding nature of travel across it the experienced bushmen and surveyors in V.T. O’Brien’s party, who chanced upon ‘Kookaburra’ on 24 July 1961, were unable to record the location of the aircraft accurately enough to pinpoint the site for subsequent searches — two of which included O’Brien himself.3

Yet Aborigines who had assisted both the Eaton and Thornycroft expeditions were well acquainted with the locality and this knowledge was preserved within specific Aboriginal communities. The role of Aborigines in the various expeditions which sought to find and recover the ‘Kookaburra’ has received scant attention in published accounts. Their efforts and their knowledge are the subject of this paper.

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* I am grateful to R.G. (Dick) Kimber for his help in the preparation of this paper, and to members of the Editorial Board of Aboriginal History for editorial assistance. Dick Smith kindly responded to my enquiries, and gave permission to reproduce relevant photographs from Davis 1980.

1 See Davis 1980: Chapters 10 and 11.
2 These 1:100,000 sheet names are employed by the Division of National Mapping.
The Thornycroft Expedition reach 'Kookaburra', 1929

Top: Bobby (Bob Jangala); Tommy (Midjanu Jampijinpa); Hughie (Hughie Jampijinpa); Jack (Jarramirnti Jangari)

Below: Frank Nottle, Les Miles, Stan Cawood and Constable Murray

Photography by W.N. Berg, courtesy of Dick Smith
The 'Kookaburra' site lies in the northeastern Tanami semi-desert, a region familiar to neighbouring Aborigines for millennia. It has thus been far less remote to man than, say, Antarctica. Yet the Tanami has been consistently avoided by all but the most skilled or adventurous non-Aborigines. In 1929 Lester Brain reported that 'only two white men' had previously 'penetrated the huge tract of desert country in which Anderson and Hitchcock crashed... One travelled for over 100 miles without a sign of water'.

In May 1896 Nat Buchanan had travelled westward some 55km to the south of the Kookaburra site, and experienced a long dry stage. He may well be the traveller Brain had in mind. Buchanan's sole companion, without whose guidance his trip would have been impossible, was a Warumungu man called Jack from the Tennant Creek area. At a place some seventy miles northwest of Tennant Creek Buchanan forced Jack to continue westward from the country he knew well — and subsequently encountered fewer waters. The journal of the explorer A. A. Davidson for 3 June 1900 records that he found native twine and an oval piece of ochre in a tree at Duck Pond waterhole on the Winnecke Creek floodout. Davidson's closest approach was thus some 110km southwest of the 'Kookaburra' site.

The main European incursion prior to 1929 was a 1909 traverse of the region by Dr Charles Chewings' party, which was also dependent on Aboriginal guides. Chewings travelled northwest from Barrow Creek, on the Overland Telegraph Line between Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, to the headwaters of the Victoria River. His journal records Aboriginal occupation along the entire route, which also lay to the southwest of the 'Kookaburra' site.

Lester Brain himself was involved in an aerial search of the area in 1925-26 but probably his route was to the southwest, closer to Tanami. The closest European approach to the 'Kookaburra' site was a little-known railway survey conducted from May to 5 November 1928. Surveyor A.M. Nash and his party crossed the northern side of the area, travelling westward. Their route lay about 65km north of the locality where 'Kookaburra' landed the following year. In fact the Thornycroft party which recovered the bodies followed the survey line for '101.5 miles', from where it crosses the Murranji Track 60 km from Newcastle Waters.
ABORIGINES AND THE 'KOOKABURRA' IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA.
The 'mystery' of the lost aircraft 'Kookaburra' has attracted much public interest in the last twenty years. Some of the many unsuccessful searches are described in Davis' book about Dick Smith's successful expedition, based on information supplied by Smith. Searches not mentioned by Davis include an attempt made by the RAAF during a 1971 exercise. Acting on information in O'Brien's record of his 1961 discovery of the aeroplane, an RAAF aircraft searched the area without success. In September 1971, John Kenna financed an aerial search with Jim Thomas of Alice Springs as pilot, and Ian Pirie and Ron Flavel. They followed O'Brien's 1961 wheel tracks, which were still clearly visible across the drought-stricken area. In July 1972, Jim Thomas flew Hitchcock's sister and her daughter over the area. The wheel tracks seen the previous year were no longer clear, owing to significant falls of rain. Harry Mason, a geologist with Otto Exploration, made an aerial search again with pilot Jim Thomas in May 1977. By this time, the only place where O'Brien's 1961 tracks were visible was the Renehan Ridges area.

In 1974 an overland expedition was made by the writer Joyce Batty and Ron and Helen Riding, all of Adelaide. This party enlisted Aboriginal guides, two men from Hooker Creek named Jimmy Blanket (a 'chief tracker' assisting police) and Victor. From a sinkhole somewhere to the east of Hooker Creek their route went 40km southeast, then about 8km to the east to skirt around dense growths of turpentine bush. Hindsight suggests that they were off to the south of 'Kookaburra'.

The ground searches mentioned by Davis involved different people, namely Vern O'Brien who 'participated in another search in 1974', and John Haslett who 'led five people with three vehicles into the desert'. A Darwin group, including Vern O'Brien and John Haslett, 'went into the desert at the expense of those participating', after 'initial reconnaissance flights ... provided, free of any charge, by Mr E.C. Osgood of Arnhem Air Charters P/L'.

The search for 'Kookaburra' exemplifies a heroic theme which recurs in historical records of European exploration of this continent: newcomers aiming to conquer a hostile environment see themselves as pitted against

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13 Personal communication, Jim Thomas to R.G. Kimber.
14 'Kookaburra flight remembered in S.A.', Centralian Advocate 19 April 1979:9. Joyce Batty (personal communication, 27 May 1981) comments that 'The blowhole pictured and described by Smith in his book is not the same we found. "Our" blowhole was cylindrical, and further south ... the number of artifacts around the vicinity proves the locality was an important place for the Aborigines. Numerous chipped stone fragments, including white quartz, weathered grinding "dish" and stones ... nearby we found a tree from which wood for a boomerang had been recently cut'.
15 Davis 1980:115-6. Haslett 1978:6 believes that the 1974 search vehicles 'had passed the wreck site by only a few hundred metres.'
the land in a test of individual endurance. This attitude is typified by searchers' statements that they are not going to 'let the desert beat them'. This point of view has been coupled with a curious blindness about the knowledge possessed by Aboriginal inhabitants, very apparent in Davis' summary of the 'Kookaburra' expeditions. Recent searches for the 'lost' aircraft made little use of Aboriginal navigational knowledge. Indeed, none of the four Aborigines who had guided the Thornycroft expedition was ever consulted.

Those four appear in a photograph taken in front of the Kookaburra (see plate 1).17 When I showed this photograph to men now living at Elliott in the Northern Territory, they immediately identified the man second from the right as 'old Hughie', confirming the caption 'Hughie'. The reference is to Hughiejampijinpa, who died aged in his seventies on 19 September 1976.18 He was the father of Hughie Jackson Jangala, current president of the Kulumindini Progress Association at Elliott. The three other men were also recognised when I prompted those interviewed with the names given in the caption: Bob, Tommy and Jack. Tommy is Midjanujampijinpa, also known as Long Tommy or Tracker Tommy, who was born about 190319 and who I had met at Elliott before his death there in June 1978. He had been interviewed at Elliott by researchers Neil Chadwick and Ken Hale (both in 1966-67), and Peter Read (on 10 August 1977)20. Bob's subsection was Jangala, and his ngurlu (matrilineal social totem) was yimiyaka. Jangari (Japangardi) was the subsection of Jack (Jarramirrnti).

Three Aboriginal stockmen who were part of Eaton's ground party just prior to the Thornycroft expedition appear in another photograph, which is not sufficiently clear to allow positive identification. However, the names of two of them, Daylight and Sambo, are given by Davis. Joyce Batty met Sambo at Wave Hill in 1976:

He is known as Brisbane Sambo, on account of having travelled from Queensland to Wave Hill Station with pastoral inspector Mr Moray. I talked at length with Sambo, he had total recall of his participation in the journey to locate Kookaburra, even numbering horses, site of departure. He is a very important person in this story. . .21

Dandy Danbayarri Jimija of Daguragu (Wattie Creek), a son of one of Eaton's guides, has recorded his father's tales of helping Europeans make the first trip to the site. He can describe the route and some incidents (including a report that they were guided over the last section by messages

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17 Expedition photographs, originally published in The Daily Guardian on 28 June 1929, are reproduced in Davis 1980:95,87,28.
18 Aboriginal Population Record, Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Tennant Creek. I am grateful to Mrs E. van Maarseveen for assistance with that Record.
20 Read and Read 1978:238-240, 259-266.
21 Joyce Batty, personal communication 27 May 1981.
'KOOKABURRA'

dropped from a scouting aeroplane) presumably recounted to him by his father.22

At least seven Aboriginal men visited the 'Kookaburra' site with the first
two parties to reach it, and thus had firsthand knowledge of its location. The
unique nature of the two trips, together with Aboriginal concern for precise
memory of geography and itineraries (accurately preserved in community
memories by public re-telling and cross-referencing to Dreaming23 tracks),
would have ensured that knowledge of the location of 'Kookaburra' spread
quickly through surrounding Aboriginal communities and was retained.

Thus it is not surprising that the Aborigines still use the location of
'Kookaburra' as a reference point when giving the locations of places in the
area, or, alternatively, can locate the 'Kookaburra' site with respect to their
named places. In particular, the following places have been mentioned to me24
in connexion with the site, often referred to as 'where that early days
aeroplane fell down': Jardamalyamalya (a soakage); Pininyina (a soakage);
Yirikilyikillyi; and Jakali-rawurr (a waterhole with gum trees).

The linguist Patrick McConvell has summarised other Aborigines' reports
that the site was not far from 'Kuyukuyuka (a billabong on a bend in Cattle
Creek) which was the setting-off place for an old "bush road" from there
eastward to Jikaya (Lake Woods, along the west of the Stuart Highway south
of Elliott). This route may well be the one shown to 'Greenhide Sam' Johnson,
manager of Wave Hill Station, by two Aboriginal guides late in the nineteenth century. They came mustering cattle directly across to the Overland
Telegraph Line at Tomkinson Creek, south of Lake Woods.25

In Aboriginal terms, the area is known for the Dreaming tracks in the
area, of which three important ones are:26

Jurntakal (Giant death adder) — travels south-eastward to the south of the
Kookaburra site, and continues along the trend of the sandhills to west of
Banka Banka Station.

Wampana (Western hare wallaby) — travels northward, having left Lajamanu
initially travelling eastward, and turning in Lawurrpa area.

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22 About March 1979 Dandy Danbayarri told his story of Eaton's expedition to Norman
McNair, a linguist working at Kalkaringi (Wave Hill Settlement). I am grateful to McNair
for playing me the recording and interpreting relevant parts (it is entirely in the Gurindji
(Kuurrinyji) language).

23 David Lewis' study of navigational powers of Western Desert men led him to appreciate
that 'in physical orientation the spiritual world, manifested in terrestrial sacred sites and
Dreaming tracks, would appear to be the primary reference' (Lewis 1976:253).

24 Personal interviews, 1979-81.

25 McConvell's one-page sketch 'Camel road to Elliott', prepared from information
supplied by Splinter Tunkulyanu and others. C. Hemphill's letter 'Central Australian
Exploration', Adelaide Observer, 4 April 1901:27, column 1.

26 See McConvell 1976, Nash 1980. Evidence on these Dreamings was heard in a recent
traditional land claim (Aboriginal Land Commission 1980, especially for the days of 1, 2
and 4 November 1980).
Warlu (Fire) — travels north-westward, along line of sandridges (in direction of prevailing wind); meets another Fire and makes Warlujarrajarra, the large open grass plain at Cattle Creek.

The area was one of the last havens in Australia for Aborigines continuing a nomadic life. J.W Bleakley noted after his visit to Wave Hill in the second half of 1928 that:

The only areas of any extent, where now it can be said that natives' hunting rounds have not been encroached upon, are Arnhem Land, ... the desert country east of the Tanami gold-fields and the large reserve... in the south-western corner of Central Australia.27

W.E.H. Stanner, who had begun research in the vicinity of Tennant Creek and Wave Hill station in mid-1934, reported in February 1935 that Aboriginal local organisation had been disrupted in all the tribes with which he made contact, but:

There is still an area, however in which the local organization, and apparently all other aspects of tribal life, are in all probability intact. This area is roughly west of the overland telegraph line between Barrow Creek and Newcastle Waters, south of Wave Hill and east of Tanami and Gordon Downs. This corresponds roughly with the Central Australian desert, and is inhabited by the Warramulla and other tribes. If it is possible I hope to touch this area later in the year, by working down from Wave Hill to Gordon Downs and Escape Creek.28

Stanner was not able to make that trip, but there is sufficient documentation about the area for us to be sure that it was inhabited.

The question of Aboriginal territorial affiliation in any tract of country is a difficult one, particularly in this semi-desert country which was shared by many groups. Tindale's map29 places his uncertain boundary between the Mudbura and the little-known Bingongina through the 'Kookaburra' area. Patrick McConvell has done the most intensive documentation of Wave Hill and adjacent areas. When working as a linguist at Daguragu (Wattie Creek) in the mid-1970s, he prepared a map,30 necessarily quite approximate, about locations in the semi-desert. The 'Kookaburra' site would be placed in Eastern Mudbura territory, close to that of the Warlpiri, the Warlmanpa, and the Kartangarurruru, a southern Gurindji group.

What is curious, then, is the lack of success encountered by the recent expeditions which enlisted local Aboriginal help. The inherent difficulties of navigation in the area are not disputed, but of more importance is how and from whom Aboriginal assistance was sought. Enquiries were usually made

27 Bleakley 1929:33.
28 Stanner 1979:97.
29 Tindale 1974. Subsequently Tindale (personal communication) has recognised Warlmanpa rights in the area.
at Wave Hill Station or one of the camps on this station such as Daguragu (Wattie Creek) and Cattle Creek, or at Hooker Creek Settlement (now known as Lajamanu).

People making enquiries at these locations in the 1960s and 1970s would not normally have encountered men with firsthand knowledge of the ‘Kookaburra’, for such men were then living at Elliott or in the Tennant Creek area (especially at Warrabri Settlement, now renamed Ali-Curung). The present-day residents of Lajamanu are mainly Warlpiri moved there by the government in the 1950s from points to the south. A number of people who were in the Wave Hill area in 1929 subsequently travelled (some of them directly, on foot) to the Tennant Creek area and have continued to live there. People at Wave Hill or Hooker Creek who were offered positions as guides to the ‘Kookaburra’ site would presumably have jumped at the chance, to get back to their country or just to get away from life at the Settlement. They would do so in good faith since almost anyone in the local Aboriginal communities possessed at least a little knowledge of the location.

We have little idea of the Aboriginal conception of Europeans’ interest in ‘Kookaburra’. But it is surely relevant that the leader of the Thornycroft expedition was the infamous Mounted Constable Murray, who had played a murderous role in the Coniston Massacre ten months earlier. News of the killings quickly reached a group of Warlpiri who had not long before walked from the lower Lander to Wave Hill, anxiety about the aftermath of the massacres caused them to delay by several years their decision to leave Wave Hill, which they had only intended to visit briefly. Presumably Constable Murray’s visit alarmed the Aboriginal community at Newcastle Waters, where he recruited four Aboriginal guides. Murray’s treatment of them when the Thornycroft expedition was following the tracks of Eaton’s horses was later described by a participant, Les Miles:

We were on the move at 7 o’clock retracing our track back for nine miles where we found Eaton’s horses had branched off in a N-W direction. Here Constable Murray had a lot of trouble with the trackers, they wanted to desert us, Murray had to take the drastic measure of threatening them with his revolver before they would continue on. They were far from friendly for the rest of the day and we had to watch them closely in case they turned on us.

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31 This refers to the events of August 1928 around Coniston station and the Lander and Hanson Rivers, all to the south and south-east of the Kookaburra site. See Hartwig 1960, Read and Japaljarri 1978, Langdon and Robertson 1978.

32 This group is called the Warlmala by Read and Japaljarri, corresponding to Stanner’s Warramulla. The term has been recorded by anthropologists as applying to a (geographically based) division of the Warlpiri. The Warlpiri term *warramala* at Yuendumu has the meaning ‘warriors’.

33 See Aboriginal Land Commission 1980 (particularly the testimony of Engineer Jack, Tuesday 28 October 1980), and 1982.

34 Read and Japaljarri 1978.

35 Quoted by Davis 1980:86; not mentioned by Berg 1929.
A contemporary account by another participant, W.N. Berg, did not mention this incident but reported that the four Aboriginal men on the Thornycroft expedition were greatly disturbed by the exhumation of the aviators' bodies at the site:

The blacks, who had not known the nature of our expedition until they reached the plane, were filled with superstitious terror of the dead, and that night they slept between two guardian fires, close to our camp, instead of some distance off, as usual.36

Moreover, on the return journey Constable Murray took custody of an Aboriginal named Willobertajack south of Tennant Creek and led him on a neck chain to Alice Springs to be tried for the murder of pastoralist Harry Henty. He was acquitted because Henty had stolen his wife.37 Tales of Murray's injustice are still remembered.

It is becoming harder to discover details of the events of 1929, since the generation of men who were involved firsthand is passing away. Stan Cawood is still living in Cairns, but Charles Eaton died on 12 November 1979,38 and Lester Brain died after a car accident in October 1980.39 None of the Aborigines who went right to the site is alive.40 However, Aborigines who were young at the time, and at one remove from visiting the site, still live at surrounding communities. For instance, Blind Alec Jupurrula remembers the Eaton expedition as he accompanied it part of the way.41 And his long-time associate Engineer Jack Japaljarri42 had this to say at a recent traditional land claim hearing, when giving evidence on the Wampana (western hare wallaby) country:

Q: Engineer, do you know where that Kookaburra aeroplane went down? Do you know that aeroplane that crashed out there?
A: That was a long time ago, 1929. He finish up near that Cattle Creek. He fall down, that big plane. That plane go travelling over that bush.
Q: Where were you? Out in the bush?
A: No, it was a man who been picking (?) with the country.
Q: That is that kumanjayi place? [a reference to Lawurrpa, a landmark south of the Kookaburra site]
A: Yes. Well, he been hearing that plane, its sound, just like a motor... and that plane him been fall down along that Jardamalyamalya, and along that creek.

36 Berg 1929:18. Davis 1980:88 adds: ‘Tortured by superstition, they became increasingly agitated when a cool wind rocked the plane, causing eerie creaks in the half-light’.
38 Davis 1980:81. Joyce Batty was able to interview Eaton, and it will be interesting to see the results of a comparison of his account with the details given in Davis 1980.
40 Sambo was alive in 1976 — see earlier note. Joyce Batty (personal communication) also informs me that Les, Hitchcock’s only surviving son, died on 13 February 1981.
41 Personal communication, Ali-Curung (Warrabri), November 1980.
42 The pair contributed the text in Read and Japaljarri 1978.
Q: Can you show us where that kumanjayi place is?
A: That... country?
Q: Yes. Can you point it out?
A: Yes. Little bit to the south. Here's the Winnecke Creek — well, he was running across. There is a waterhole here, Mirirrinyungu. He going from Mirirrinyungu, Jijimulungu here, and Wajawanta, Kuna, Kalymalyamalya. That is near Jardamalyamalya. [indicating points on a composite 1:275,000 chart]. . .

Several points become clear. It is not possible to maintain the belief, voiced in 1929 by Lester Brain, that 'there was no habitation and that blacks rarely visited here owing to the lack of water'. Erroneous views as to the lack of traditional Aboriginal occupation in the area were aired during the publicity campaign for Davis and Smith's book. As part of his dramatisation of the European feats associated with the 'Kookaburra' saga, Smith made such remarks as 'Aborigines never went into the Tanami desert', and, talking of the site, said 'There's no water there', and 'Nearest water is 80 miles'. Why exaggerate when the facts are fascinating?

As for the availability of water, Brain himself pointed out that the sinkhole about 33km from Kookaburra was a possible source of water, and during Eaton's expedition Aboriginal stockmen found water between Jangaminji and the sinkhole. Smith's own research shows water was located near Eaton's campsite of 25 April 1929 which apparently was about a third of the way from Jangaminji to the sinkhole, 59km directly to the south of east of Jangaminji. The relevant water features marked on the 1:1,000,000 Halls Creek chart are Blue Lagoon, about 20km from Jangaminji, and the upper reaches of Cattle Creek, about 40km from Jangaminji and 20km from the sinkhole. It was probably Blue Lagoon that was near the campsite of 25 April 1929, as the son of one of the guides has said there was water at a place called Bluebush which was the second camp out from Wave Hill. He added that Eaton's party's last possible water was at Jakali-rawurr, further to the southeast. Eaton testified in the 1929 inquiry that 'there was no water, so far as he could see for 45 miles (72 kilometres). He said that there were no

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43 Aboriginal Land Commission 1980:685, 1 November 1980. The questioner is the counsel for the claimants, Mr Ross Howie. I have added the remarks in square brackets. It is conceivable that this memory is of another aircraft flying over the area in those years. The only other possibility known to me is Brain's earlier aerial searches, mentioned above.

44 Davis 1980:58.

45 Telephone interview with Dick Smith, broadcast by ABC Radio 'Australia all over' on Sunday morning, 12 October 1980. Smith (personal communication, 9 March 1981) informed me that '80 miles should be 80km'.

46 Davis 1980:70. For the distance, see Davis 1980:123-4, though there is a possible error of a few kilometres. Jangaminji is the standard Gurindji spelling of what some maps spell Junjiminingi or Chugamidgee.

47 Davis 1980:73.

48 Dandy Danbayarri, in his account to Norman McNair; see above.
animals in the area, adding: "There was one rather gruesome test of that — the bodies were not touched in any way at all." It would have been more cautious of Eaton to observe that scavenging carnivores probably had not visited the site in the seventeen or so days since the airmen's death, and that the fire they had started, which burnt out some twenty-five square kilometres around them, may have had something to do with that.

As to how often Aborigines visited the area, there is the overwhelming testimony of the number of place names and Dreaming tracks in the area, as recorded for example in the course of traditional land claims recently before the Aboriginal Land Commissioner, which point directly to occupation and use of the area all around the 'Kookaburra' site up until at least the 1930s, marginal as the region was. Only insofar as the Aboriginal occupants usually retreated to the better watered hinterlands in the drier times could one agree with Brain that 'there was no habitation'.

Europeans have removed virtually all physical traces of the events of 1929 from the Tanami: Hitchcock lies buried in a Perth cemetery, Anderson at Mosman in Sydney and the airframe of the 'Kookaburra' is now in the Central Australian Aviation Museum in Alice Springs. The name of the aeroplane and of Eaton appear on maps of the area and a cairn has been placed near the site — both typically European ways of commemorating events in the landscape. The ancient Aboriginal marking of ancestral 'events' in the landscape is still carried on in the Dreaming songs and ceremonies, even though it is unlikely that Aborigines will ever again occupy this land in the way their ancestors did. The landing of the 'Kookaburra' over fifty years ago was a new intrusion into this area which left a mark and a 'mythology' on the landscape for both Europeans and Aborigines.

PARKES, NEW SOUTH WALES

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