

## AN UNEASY COEXISTENCE: AN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE OF 'CONTACT HISTORY' IN SOUTHEAST QUEENSLAND

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Christopher Anderson, Anthropology curator of the South Australian Museum, has identified a serious problem in attempting to describe 'the Aboriginal perspective of "contact history", [as] it is still very much a viewpoint seen through Eurocentric eyes'.<sup>1</sup> The history of South-East Queensland in particular has not been addressed from a balanced perspective. Anthropologists and historians, including John Taylor and Bill Rosser<sup>2</sup>, have tended to focus on the conflict and violence of the pastoral frontier, but have ignored the social interaction between Aborigines and Europeans which has been recorded in part, by W.E. Hanlon, F.W. Hinchcliffe, Lutheran Pastor Haussmann and others.

John Taylor's 1967 thesis, 'Race Relations in South-East Queensland 1840-1860', addressed the origins of conflict between the settlers and the Aborigines. Taylor admitted that his thesis lacked genealogical material and any sort of data on religious ties and beliefs<sup>3</sup> and failed to appreciate that 'conflict' occurred because of the clash over two different economic systems. He wrote that 'The fundamental problem that beset the Aborigines was how they should deal with the settler and how best could they share in the superabundance of goods and stock that had suddenly descended upon them'.<sup>4</sup> Thus Taylor assumed that Aborigines desired to control the squatters' herds and drays loaded with supplies because their own resources were inadequate, as if 'conflict' was the first solution to the Aborigines' problem. However, it could be argued that Aborigines were fighting to *save* their economic resources, that is, the water-holes, demanding that the land and THE PEOPLE be respected. From an Aboriginal perspective, I will argue that Yugambeh people continue to fight a battle both social and environmental, to ensure that their cultural heritage is respected and not exploited.

Yugambeh people share a common linguistic dialect chain and utilize the river systems of the Logan, Albert, Pimpama, Coomera and Nerang rivers including all the adjacent streams and creeks. Yugambeh family groups include Kombumerri; Wangerriburra; Migunburri; Mulunjali; Gugugin; Birrinburra; Bolongin and link with people from the Tweed River, known as Minjinbal.

Yugambeh people were subjected to the arrival of many groups of Europeans who came into their country for different reasons. The strangers included shipwrecked sailors, convict runaways, timbercutters, explorers, missionaries, government officials, the military, settlers, pastoralists and surveyors. Those early arrivals created an interest for the

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1 Anderson 1983, pp. 473-4.

2 Taylor 1967, Rosser 1990.

3 Taylor 1967, p. 164.

4 Taylor 1967, p.135.

Aborigines who, it can be assumed, were not seen as any immediate threat. By the time Brisbane was established, local Aborigines appeared quite used to the movement of many strangers in their midst and no doubt had developed strategies on how to deal with the intrusion.

Taylor's Eurocentric interpretation suggests that there is a need for continued research on the subjects of contact and conflict in south-east Queensland. For this purpose I have attempted to briefly assess some early historical records to determine, from an Aboriginal perspective, how Yugambeh people adapted to a changing environment and survived through an uneasy co-existence with newcomers to their land. I will conclude by questioning what benefit Yugambeh people gained by assisting the newcomers who moved into their country illegally, usurping the right of Yugambeh people to access their economic resource - the land. Indeed, had those many early European arrivals to southeast Queensland respected appropriately those Aboriginal individuals and communities who assisted their progress and aided their survival, the 'contact history' would have been easier to interpret.

In the 1850s the Aborigines had to cope with the intrusions of not only the ministers of religion and the timber cutters but also pastoralists who began taking control over vast tracts of land for the purpose of grazing cattle. The pastoralists sent a petition - unjust because no war had been declared - to the Government to call in a force of mounted troopers to 'disperse' those individuals who attempted to halt the intrusion of strange animals and people into their country. Aborigines became the victims of a legal system which clashed with their own values and beliefs: their resistance to the advance of the pastoral frontier meant either death through the violence of the Mounted Police or death sentences imposed through an unequal legal system. Individuals adapted their own strategies for survival which avoided conflict and the stories of Bilin Bilin and Jenny are included below as brief examples.

### Henry Stobart

One of the earliest references to the Nerang Creek, a focal point of the southeast Queensland people, was made by the Reverend Henry Stobart who wrote a journal entry for 23 August 1853.<sup>5</sup> Stobart's description of the Nerang Creek suggests that the area could be compared to the beauty of present day Kakadu, currently featured in an extensive mixed-media advertising campaign to attract tourists to the Northern Territory. Stobart's journal entry revealed that there were abundant resources; he collected 'a large number of a kind of Palm which the natives call Meechia' (Midjim Palm canes) which were already being marketed in England as walking sticks. A Mr Sheridan who worked as Tide Surveyor for the Customs Department accompanied Stobart on the trip.<sup>6</sup> Sheridan was a competent guide, having already established a friendly relationship with Aboriginal people from the vicinity of Moreton Bay, employing them, defending their rights and giving them recognition for acts of courage.<sup>7</sup> Stobart commented that:

The Aborigines in this part rarely see white men, except very bad specimens of them - sawyers chiefly, engaged in cutting timber - from whom they have

<sup>5</sup> Stobart indicated that his approach to a Yugambeh camp site had been observed and that the women and children had been hidden until it was determined that he was not a government representative whose presence they obviously feared.

<sup>6</sup> *Moreton Bay Courier*, 27 August 1853.

<sup>7</sup> *Moreton Bay Courier*, 8 October 1853, 28 January 1854.

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learnt little else of our language excepting oaths, and by whom, they are, I fear, in too many cases treated very inhumanely.<sup>8</sup>

### **W.E. Hanlon**

W.E. Hanlon, who lived most of his life in Yugambeh country, has provided a useful example of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal co-existence. For example, in a paper to the Royal Historical Society of Queensland, 27 March 1934, he gave a description of Yugambeh country as it was when he arrived in Australia in 1863. Taylor's thesis focussed on depredation committed by Aborigines against Europeans, but Hanlon wrote of the 'many blacks in the district':

on no occasion did they give us any trouble. On the contrary, we were always glad to see them, for they brought us fish, kangaroo tails, crabs, or honey, to barter for our flour, sugar, tea, or 'tumbacca'.<sup>9</sup>

While revealing his own Eurocentric attitudes Hanlon at least noted many of his informants' names, as well as his respect for the people whose country his parents adopted as their own. My grandmother, Jenny Graham (1860-1943) was one of his informants.

### **F.E. Roberts**

The Queensland border survey began in 1863 and was conducted by Surveyor F.E. Roberts over a span of three years in the company of several Yugambeh people. These individuals determined a rate of pay and working conditions which Roberts possibly had no option other than to accept. He used Yugambeh language in his journals to identify his survey points but not once in his copious notes did he identify those individuals, apart from calling them 'my blacks'.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that Bilin Bilin (see below) would have been one of these individuals accompanying Roberts but more research is needed to verify this. No recognition is given to the contribution made by these individuals in developing the state of Queensland, but the study of their language by Yugambeh descendants has provided important evidence to challenge this historical oversight.

### **J.G. Haussmann**

The Lutheran Missionary Haussmann arrived in Yugambeh country in 1866 and remained in the area until his death in 1902. Haussmann had previously been based in Brisbane and was once speared in a confrontation with Aborigines who tried to remove him from the hut in which he was living. His missionary career took him to Sydney to study theology and he eventually returned to set up a mission near Beenleigh, in Yugambeh country. He has been described as an 'untiring worker among the Aborigines',<sup>11</sup> and it could indeed be said that the people experienced a spirit of co-existence with the Reverend Haussmann and his family, accepting him, but using his negotiating skills to develop strategies for future economic survival. For example, a letter written by Haussmann revealed that the Aborigines had asked him to negotiate for a useful area of land that they could develop for themselves.<sup>12</sup> Haussmann formed a relationship with several people from

<sup>8</sup> Stobart, Journal, 23 August 1858.

<sup>9</sup> Hanlon, 1934, p. 210; Hanlon's unpublished notes and manuscript are held in the Fryer Library, University of Queensland.

<sup>10</sup> Roberts 1866.

<sup>11</sup> Grope, 1981, p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> *Logan Witness*, 19 November 1881; land at Nerang was gazetted for this purpose but later withdrawn and declared open for general selection.

the Logan, Albert and Nerang rivers. His family grew up with my grandmother, Jenny Graham and her extended family.

Hausmann's writings reveal that he was intent on empire building and he spent his life trying to extend the area covered by his Ministry; but one must question what benefits Yugambeh people gained from this relationship which spanned a period close to forty years. He wrote:

In retrospect of the past 40 years, during which the Lord has permitted me to live in Australia, I have lived 36 years in my beloved Queensland and 6 years in Victoria. The promise of God has been realised in my time. Queensland is a miracle before my eyes, so many beautiful towns and fields in many regions which 30 years ago had nothing but desert and lonely places. How great and rich our German Nation in Queensland has become. The most of them arrived here within the last few years as poor people, now hundreds of them possess good properties and herds of cattle.<sup>13</sup>

Yugambeh people were not privileged to share these same economic benefits, and by the time he was writing, the Yugambeh people were being forced onto reserves such as Deebing Creek.

Hausmann's writings could be considered important primary source material for academic study. Here was a man who should have intimately known the people of the Logan, Pimpama, Albert and Nerang River, but through the self-absorption which is evident in his extensive writings, Hausmann failed to leave a record correctly identifying his neighbours of at least 36 years. He failed to acknowledge the extent to which his own survival may have been aided by his relationship with the people and he completely ignored, in his deliberation on German settlement, the rights of Yugambeh people to their land.<sup>14</sup> Where he did refer to Aborigines, we learn that the local 'chief' of the Albert and Logan river spent time discussing theology with him and also encouraged his extended family to sit down and listen to Hausmann preach.<sup>15</sup> The man identified as 'King of the Logan and Pimpama' was Bilin Bilin.

### **Two Yugambeh people Bilin Bilin**

Bilin Bilin moved about in his own country, set up strategies to protect his family, negotiated work contracts, and refused to pay to travel on the new train which by 1887 was traversing his country. He officiated at ceremonies, presided at burials, and kept such 'sacred' locations a secret. Dealing with strangers of different nationalities, he was multi-lingual. There are several photographs of this man held in archives and reference has been made to him in journals, newspapers and letters. When Bilin Bilin considered that his life's work was done, F.W. Hinchcliffe reported that he 'sat' down at the Deebing Creek Industrial Mission with members of his extended family group. Bilin Bilin (whom Hinchcliffe referred to as 'Jackey') apparently was at that location because he and his friend Billy 'were too old to travel and that Mr. Meston had at last caught them to go to Deebin. [sic]<sup>16</sup> Bilin Bilin wore a breast plate identifying him as the King of the Logan and Pimpama and

<sup>13</sup> Lohe, 1964 p.19.

<sup>14</sup> However it must be remembered that Hausmann's writings are translations and could suffer from a bias of the translator, therefore his writings as a primary source should not be dismissed but perhaps reassessed.

<sup>15</sup> Lohe 1964, p.3.

<sup>16</sup> F.W. Hinchcliffe, 'Jackey Jackey, King of the Logan and Pimpama', *The Beaudesert Times*, 12 June 1932. Archibald Meston was Chief Protector of Aborigines.

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it could be said that he wore this plate to assert the right of his extended family group to determine their own future. Evidence suggests that many of Bilin Bilin's descendants remained in their own country and had the tenacity to adapt to a changing environment. It is the descendants of these individuals who continue the battle started by Bilin Bilin and his relations to demand respect for their cultural heritage. Their strength is not drawn from having access to the economic benefits of the land - which they were denied - but from their cultural and spiritual knowledge of their own country.

By this time, Haussmann's grandson, George Appel, beneficiary of resources provided through access to Yugambeh land, had completed a course in law. He retired from practice by 1889 to become a farmer, began a career in politics and before he died in 1929, was a wealthy landowner. According to newspaper articles, Appel entertained extensively and lived a lavish lifestyle.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, Appel was also the Home Secretary, whose responsibility included Aboriginal Affairs. One hundred years after Appel was accepted as a lawyer, the first descendants of Yugambeh people began to complete secondary studies, and it was not until about 1980 that Yugambeh people began to graduate with their first degrees and diplomas from tertiary institutions.



Jenny Graham, 1935.  
Courtesy Ysola Best.

<sup>17</sup> Waterson 1972, p. 4.

## Jenny

To conclude I will briefly relate the story of my grandmother Jenny who was born at the same time as George Appel. Since their mothers were friends, and since both resided along the Pimpama River, it is more than likely that George and Jenny played together as small children. Jenny never learned to read or write but she was well versed in the way the Government of the day functioned. She had her first child to a white man, Andrew Graham, and this union was eventually 'legitimated' in a Church of England ceremony in 1898. By this time the children numbered ten. Edith, my mother - child number eleven - was born in April, 1899. Andrew accepted his responsibility as a father and the eleven children bore his name.

Jenny accepted her own cultural and kinship responsibilities. She carried the marks of initiation or grief and raised a family of eleven children who attended school. She was fastidious in their dress and manner of speech. The children grew up utilizing the river systems of Yugambeh country, a resource that Yugambeh people had exploited, before European contact, for thousands of years.<sup>18</sup> In spite of the intrusion of newcomers, this tradition continues in an unbroken family line to this present day, and in the new economic system, the business is known commercially as oyster farming.

Jenny lost a son in France, fighting in the defence of this country, and two grandsons, one of whom died a brutal death as a prisoner of war. Jenny's grandchildren, and many others in the extended Yugambeh family group, fought in those wars on foreign soil and returned to their own country. While they suffered the psychological scars that are a burden of warfare, they suffered also, once again, as victims in their own country from covert racism.

Discrimination is difficult to quantify because each Yugambeh carried his or her individual burden, and the trauma for some included being denied the right to marry people of their own choice. It could be said that not all suffered discrimination from exclusion, but there is oral evidence to suggest that individuals were conscious of barriers, real or invisible, which denied them access to employment, education, theatres, hotels and clubs. It is possible that being marginalised in this way by society had its benefits as it helped individuals to maintain a family link, which has become obvious, in later years, at family gatherings including funerals.

Jenny died before the end of the Second World War and therefore was unable to contribute support to those in her family who had to cope with the aftermath. Like Bilin, she knew her own country and developed strategies to leave her children with a heritage which ensured that her descendants would know their relationship to their own land. Her family continued to care for the extended family group and shared their resources. Jenny had provided an inner strength which is undefinable, but which enabled her descendants to retain pride in their heritage.

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The only evidence that the relationship with the surveyors or the missionaries benefited Yugambeh people is found in the Aboriginal place names recorded by Roberts and the fact that Haussmann's grandson, George, the lawyer, politician, land-owner and Home Secretary, effectively saved an important ceremonial site in the middle of the Gold Coast from

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Aird, 1987, pers. comm. re archaeological assessment of shell mounds at Oyster Cove, now known as Sanctuary Cove.

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destruction in 1913.<sup>19</sup> The site is known as Jebbribillum Park and it remains today a landmark of Yugambah cultural heritage. The Lands Department wants to give it back to the people as a statement of land rights (a privilege which includes having to pay the water rates) even though Yugambah people advised the Department to lease it, as was their right as the cultural custodians. What does this generous statement by the Lands Department mean to Yugambah people? Legally it would mean that as well as paying the rates, Yugambah people would be required to maintain the Park which is an extensively-used public facility. Yugambah people believe it is more practical for the local city council to maintain this park but they continue to set strategies in place to encourage extended family groups to enjoy its heritage value. Yugambah people will continue to challenge the city council to alleviate the substantial rates which could become a financial burden in the future.

Jenny's and Bilin Bilin's grandchildren have taken up their cultural responsibility to fight for their country. The battle, fought in boardrooms and lecture rooms, is to prevent tourism entrepreneurs from exploiting our culture and to halt the development which threatens the destruction of sites and the pollution of our waterways. And it is a battle with the anthropologists and the historians who seek to tell us our social and cultural history.

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<sup>19</sup> Nerang Shire Council, 1913 shire records, 1913, p. 148, Queensland State Archives. Information provided by Robert Longhurst, Historical Research Unit, John Oxley Library, Qld.

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