Preface

This edition of *Aboriginal History* is dedicated to Isobel White (whom we all knew as Sally White), who died in August 1998 after a long and interesting life. We shall miss her humour and kindness as well as her steady contributions to Aboriginal studies over many years.

Sally was born in 1912 in Harrow, now a suburb of London. Like many members of her family she went to King Edward’s High School, and between 1930 and 1933 she studied economics at Girton College, Cambridge. In her second year there, she was invited to attend Maynard Keynes’ lectures, along with a select group. Her family were Labour party voters, and Sally herself was a member of the Communist Party in the 1930s. She had a scholarship to study for a master’s degree in Toronto; this was in 1934 at the height of the depression in Canada. In fact, as she confessed later, she spent most of her time there engaged in political activity, and editing the *Young Worker*, a communist newspaper. She left to return to the UK when her father was taken ill. Back in the UK she worked as a factory inspector for the Home Office. She met Michael White and they were married at Hampstead registry office in 1938. After the prolonged difficulties of the war years in the UK, Sally and Michael emigrated to the United States in 1947 with their two sons Nicholas and Jonathan. Their third child, Charlotte, was born in Austin, Texas, where the family spent five of the six years to 1953. Unfortunately because of pre-war left wing political involvements, it proved necessary for the family to leave the US abruptly in 1953. Michael obtained a job at CSIRO in Canberra with the assistance of Dr (later Sir) Otto Frankel. As the McCarthy era abated, the family returned to the US, to Missouri, but the attractions of Australia held sway, and Melbourne became their home from 1958 to 1977.

The brief residence in Missouri was important in that, after a decade of commitment to her family, Sally returned to academic pursuits. Relinquishing the economic field, she took some undergraduate courses in anthropology (‘My heart wasn’t in economics,’ she said). It was here that Sally first read the work of Mrs Daisy Bates — it was the only Australian book in the library. This was the beginning of a lifelong fascination with Daisy Bates. Back in Melbourne Sally became first a tutor, later a lecturer in anthropology at Monash. She joined a field trip in 1966 to northern South Australia (Oodnadatta, Maree and Port Augusta) with Cath Ellis and Luise Hercus, which was her first fieldwork experience with Aboriginal people.

In 1969 she first visited Yalata Lutheran Mission, a community of displaced Western Desert people who had been relocated to the edge of the Nullarbor Plain in 1952. She was with Margaret Kartomi the musicologist, and on later visits combined forces with Luise Hercus and Cath Ellis. Margaret Kartomi draws on material collected on that trip for her piece in this volume (‘Play songs by children and their educational implica-
tions'), which includes the eponymous *Witpikspa* (weetbix) song. Luise Hercus, Sally and others also made fieldtrips to the Lake Eyre Basin, and it is from here that Luise collected the linguistic material documented in ""Wire Yard": A song from near Lake Eyre'. As the article by Luise Hercus and Grace Koch observes, Mick McLean, who was the last of the Wangkangurru speakers to be born and brought up in the Simpson Desert, was particularly fond of Sally whom he referred to as 'Old Charlie' — the nearest he could get to pronouncing her name. Sally also made frequent visits to Walwa on the Upper Murray where her daughter Charlotte was working as a doctor. Barry Blake and Julie Reid in this volume provide an analysis of the available information on the Pallangan language spoken in this region. Another contribution, by Lynette Oates, documents the historical role of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in preserving knowledge of Aboriginal languages.

In August 1970, supported by a grant from what was then the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Sally began her substantive fieldwork at Yalata on a project to investigate Aboriginal women's status in tradition life. This was published in 1978 in Fay Gale's edited book on *Woman's Role in Aboriginal Society*. She went to Yalata again in January 1971 and in 1974, with Michael dropping her off there while en route to Western Australia for his own entomological research. The contribution to this volume by CSIRO entomologist David Rentz ('Travels with Sally') provides some vignettes from these trips.

Sally was the first anthropologist to work at Yalata, although Ronald and Catherine Berndt had worked with members of the same group of desert people in the 1940s when these people were still living in and around Ooldea Soak on the Trans-Australian railway line. Sally believed that the Lutheran Evangelical Mission which ran the community was antagonistic to anthropologists. Nevertheless she gained access, and camped at what was known as 'Big Camp', usually with Polly Prater or Alice Cox, two important women who feature in *Fighters and Singers*. My contribution to this edition ('The politics of space and mobility') which was inspired by Sally's work, traces the inception of the Big Camp idea at Yalata and highlights its political underpinnings. Women at Yalata were keen to share their knowledge with a female anthropologist and Sally witnessed several ceremonies during the periods of her fieldwork. She documented and published on a rainmaking ritual: 'It always rained afterwards!' she observed. Her work at this time included a publication on hunting and the use of dogs — a theme taken up by Betty Meehan, Rhys Jones and Annie Vincent in their ethnography of the use of dogs among the Anbarra. Kingsley Palmer's article (this volume) 'Favourite foods and the fight for country' provides a further contribution to the ethnography of economic activities, which deals with the cash economy and artefact production, as well as hunting and foraging. Sally's personal collection of Yalata artefacts included a small mulga carving of a wombat (found in the Nullarbor region), made by a Yalata man for whom they were a speciality. 'A Hughie Windlass wombat' she declared, 'has wombatness, the essence of wombat'.

Monash University had sponsored a series of seminars on Aboriginal affairs in 1972 and 1973, which were collected and published as *Aborigines in the 70s*, a series which recognised the dramatic changes in Aboriginal policy brought about by the new Labor government. These changes included a new Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the appointment of the Woodward Commission, the inauguration of the National Abo-
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original Consultative Council, and the incorporation of Aboriginal communities which meant the beginning of the end of mission and welfare control. Sally’s article in the collection of Monash seminars: ‘The Nundroo incident: the trial of an Aboriginal football team’, documents a landmark trial in which — probably for the first time — Aboriginal defendants from an Aboriginal community were fully legally represented and assisted by an interpreter, in court. The defendants were young Yalata men who had caused a (relatively minor) affray at the Nundroo roadhouse while returning slightly intoxicated from a football match. Local police carrying loaded firearms had arrived at the Aboriginal camp in the early hours of the following morning to arrest those involved. The Yalata men were defended by lawyers from a well-known firm of solicitors in Adelaide, Elliott Johnston and Co, and Sally appeared as an expert witness for the defence. By choosing to write this article, Sally once more honoured her socialist principles. In particular, she documented the racist provocation to which Yalata Aborigines had been subjected by the roadhouse proprietor both before and during the incident.

After Michael and Sally retired, in 1977 they moved from Melbourne to Canberra, where Sally became a visitor in the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University (ANU). She befriended Pearl Duncan who was studying anthropology at ANU, and who has contributed an article for this volume that Sally had always encouraged her to write: ‘British Justice’. Once in Canberra, Sally revived her longstanding interest in Mrs Daisy Bates, which had been nurtured over the years by anecdotes from Yalata people who had known Bates at Ooldea. Sally began to make use of the National Library collections which contain the ninety-nine folios of Daisy Bates’ papers, and embarked upon a systematic reading of these handwritten papers. This eventuated in the publication of Bates’ monumental work *The Native Tribes of Western Australia* which Sally edited (National Library of Australia 1985).

Throughout her life, Sally was a voracious and eclectic reader, and a feminist. During her last twenty years in Canberra she belonged to an extraordinarily active women’s reading group. Afternoon meetings (always with a cup of tea) were held weekly at a member’s house. The group proved to be a source of mutual support and friendship to its members, as well as providing the opportunity to read and discuss hundreds of books. Throughout her life, Sally’s academic contributions were balanced by a strong commitment to the roles of professor’s wife, mother to her three children, later grandmother to six grandchildren. Isabel McBryde, who has written movingly about Sally’s life, was a loyal friend to her and delivered the eulogy at her funeral in Canberra. Indeed each of the contributions to this volume of *Aboriginal History* is a small tribute to the life of this warm, witty and intelligent woman.

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