

# Chapter 1

## My family background, 1890 to 1941

My first encounter with my grandmother Kanaki was during the early 1950s. She would travel into Alice Springs every fortnight in the white station manager's truck from Maryvale cattle station along with other family members to collect her pension money. Maryvale is a place Mardu people call Titjikala (meaning land of the eagle). The station truck would collect stores and generally stay one or two days in Alice Springs for weekend recreation of one kind or another. The bush camp was in an area west of the Rainbow-town cottages and south of Connellan's airstrip, close to the MacDonnell Ranges. Every fortnight Kanaki would bring in bags of *mingulpa*, or native tobacco, from out-bush, for my mother. What sticks in my mind is that, during these visits, she would tell me stories about her past.

Kanaki told me that her father, a Marduntjara man was born at Kulkara (called Kulgera by Europeans) at a time when only a few Europeans had passed through the region. Kanaki was born some distance west of Kulkara at a water hole called, Puntu tjapa (or ground lizard) a native well north of Uluru; an important location on the southern part of the Gibson Desert. As a young girl in the early 1890s, my grandmother moved around the western deserts, then east to her father's birthplace at Kulkara. This was about the time the Horn Expedition went through the region and she remembered Spencer's trek through the Mardu lands to Uluru and Kata Tjuta. At the age of about four or five, she remembered the story of a small group of white men with a policeman called Cowle from Illamurta, on McMinn's Creek, travelling through Mardu and Arrernte lands from Illamurta to Uluru, returning then to Glen Helen Gorge.<sup>1</sup> They made the trek, there and back, on horseback and went up through King's Canyon, crossing Lake Amadeus, the southern part of the Gibson Desert, the Petermann Ranges and then returning to Hermannsburg through to Glen Helen Station.<sup>2</sup>

Kanaki grew up migrating around Mardu lands. In doing so, Kanaki participated in traditional ceremonies, foraged in favoured food collection grounds as well as engaging in meeting obligations made to others. Such commitments meant attending funerals of relatives as well as keeping meeting arrangements made with both close and distant relatives. She attended initiation ceremonies that included fulfilling obligations made many years before and acted as cultural custodian to younger brothers and sisters. In later years the small bush family

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1 Spencer 1896.

2 Mulvaney 2000: 20-21.

travelled east to Lilla Creek (*Lil* means in Mardu, place where the water disappears and the suffix *-la* indicates the adverb), for ceremonial reasons and Kanaki stayed with relatives while her traditional husband (Wati Kunmanara, meaning dead man) went to ceremony at Ooraminna. At the time camels were the main form of trade-transportation and Lilla Creek, a tributary to the Finke River, became one of the most reliable watering depots. While at Lilla Creek Kanaki conceived my mother; her biological father was a white man named William (Billy) Briscoe.

It was around October of 1918 that my mother was born. Kanaki named her Eileen. They were inseparable as they travelled as far south to Aprawatatja and Puntu Tjapa, the birthplace of Kanaki. They travelled together with other family around the edges of the Western, Gibson and Great Victoria deserts for ceremonial reasons. This region stretched from the edge of the Simpson Desert to Lilla Creek, north to Illamurta, and as far south as Oodnadatta west to Aprawatatja, deep into Yunguntjatjara and Pitjantjatjara country. This is a huge area, and relates more to traditional relationships rather than land ownership in the European sense.

Billy Briscoe was a rouseabout and acted as a station manager on short term arrangements, he also worked for Afghan cameleers as a camel transport shepherd. Later in the 1920s, Briscoe moved north to manage Randal Stafford's Coniston lease. Fredrick Brooks who was later speared by 'Bullfrog' Japanunga as 'payback' also worked for Stafford.<sup>3</sup> All these white men knew each other from their pastoral, dogging and transport activities around the western side of Lake Eyre.<sup>4</sup> Stafford and Brooks also knew Briscoe from his days camel shepherding from Oodnadatta to Stuart (now Alice Springs). The route from Oodnadatta to Lilla Creek is mainly dry mesa country with sand hills, saltpans, gibber, low growing desert flora and sparsely littered desert oak trees (in Mardu language *kulka* or *karlka*).

Mardu lands, likewise, are distinguished by weathered mesa, low lying hills of mulga scrub, *kulka* and sandy desert on the western side of the Finke River. This is land belonging to Marduntjara peoples. The country begins in an area called Larapinta, and goes south to Apatula and north to Illamurta, then across the southern part of the Gibson Desert westwards of the Petermann Ranges. It then goes west, taking in lands shared by Yunguntjatjara, and Pitjantjatjara peoples, including the Pintubi, Antekerintja and Arrernte peoples. Bush people were attracted to Lilla Creek by railway-building activities and the convenience of

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<sup>3</sup> Wilson and O'Brien 2003: 59-72.

<sup>4</sup> Hill 2003: 153.

the many waterholes along the camel transport route. Lilla Creek was also on a ceremonial migratory route from Uluru to Ooraminna, and its permanent water made it a guaranteed camping site.

The itinerant European, Afghan and Chinese men – who were cameleers, rail workers, pastoral labourers, telegraph station workers and casual tourists – came with alcohol and often left leaving the women pregnant and their children destitute. Some Mardu women were very young and left their children in the camps. Others were either already burdened with too many children or had left to meet ceremonial obligations in distant communities. In many instances Aboriginal women were raped thus exacerbating the population explosion of unwanted children of mixed descent, most of whom were abandoned by their white fathers. The workers like the cameleers would leave the camps and return in 12 months only to see their mixed blood offspring as babies in the camps. Many Mardu people were killed by pastoralists and brutal marauding police. Some Aborigines were killed at will and others for spearing for food cattle and sheep that crossed their traditional hunting lands. In particular, the struggle was over water resources on the Aboriginal side and killing and disturbing stock on the European pastoralist's side.<sup>5</sup> Equally Mardu peoples had to cope with European population influxes that meant conceding to the ravages of stock that took over waterholes dispersing native game. Moreover, Mardu people were forced into conceding their land through the influx of stock, as well as their culture because antiquarian collectors removed sacred objects from ceremonial grounds, mostly never to be returned. For me, the history of Aboriginal politics begins in central Australia, and, as many Aborigines will discover as they research their historic past, it appears that concessions were made in only one direction: a direction favouring colonists.

The cultural implications in this upheaval also meant that Mardu peoples were forced to leave their traditional lands that had become occupied by strange animals such as cattle and sheep; their waterholes were poisoned; bush women were being lured to telegraph stations; and bush men were dislodged from their ceremonial obligations and practices. The culture, seemingly unchanged for millennia, crumbled in mostly material ways because of the imposition of a new mode of production. Cultural practices that had continued for 1000 or more years were lost. Animal game, so much a staple diet of hunter-gatherers, was soon changed as sheep and cattle meat entered the Mardu diet. What began as a strange phenomenon ended up as everlasting death or perdition.

From our grandmothers, who lived through this brutal past, and from our mothers, who were born of it, we learned that most of the white men, who ventured into the Tywerentye, Western MacDonnell Ranges, and the river

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<sup>5</sup> Mulvaney 2000: 10-30.

regions of Leratupa and Umbarntuwa, came alone, without wives. They came to build and operate the telegraph stations, the pastoral leases, the small stores and the railway stations. Slowly, between the 1890s and 1914, a few white women began migrating from South Australia and other colonies, and many learnt that their white husbands had black children whom they had abandoned to Aboriginal camps. As the half-caste population grew, the small number of white women residing in the service towns dotted along the arterial route from Oodnadatta to what is now Darwin began to panic. They panicked not only because they saw the presence of half-caste children in the same classrooms as disadvantaging their white children, but also because their white husbands had sired these same children.

The increasing presence of half-caste children aroused deep-seated fears and anxieties in the settler women. Their men were equally intent on denying the existence of these offspring. Each morning when these men washed their faces and looked out across the creeks in service towns, they would see their abandoned children in the Aboriginal fringe camps running around before their very eyes, barely existing. Meanwhile, the children themselves were forced to rely on these same belligerent, brutal and racist males, their fathers, for food, occasionally supplemented by bush food, although for the most part government rations were their only form of economic support.

Horseshoe Bend was a pastoral lease owned by consecutive white owners: the first owners were a British company, followed by a man named Breden who purchased the lease from British pastoralists following the severe droughts of the 1890s. The next was Gus Elliott who came up from the Flinders Ranges to work in the burgeoning pastoral industry.<sup>6</sup> Both these latter white men had numerous Aboriginal female sexual partners who produced many children of mixed descent. In 1926, at the age of about seven, Eileen and Kanaki left Lilla Creek for Horseshoe Bend, where Eileen went to her first school lessons conducted by Gus Elliot's European wife Ruby.

Gus Elliot fathered at least four children of mixed descent from Mardu and Arrernte women, like Lil. One of the children was Michael Gus Elliott who was raised at Hermannsburg, the other three Bert, Sonny and Jim had their names changed from Elliott to Swan when Elliott married the European woman, Ruby, whom he brought to the station.<sup>7</sup> Lil was a Marduntjara woman and sister to my grandmother Kanaki. My mother Eileen became a sister to Lil and her offspring who in turn became a sister to my mother's two traditional brothers, Intji and

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<sup>6</sup> Strehlow 1969.

<sup>7</sup> Hill 2003: 653-654.

Percy Summerfield, who were born in the early 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Traditional relationships were complex between the Swan and Briscoe families and were made more so as Europeans moved into the region.

Kanaki and Eileen both stayed at Horseshoe Bend before moving, in 1927, to New Crown Station. During that year an Aboriginal census was taken across what might now be called the settled pastoral areas of the Northern Territory.<sup>9</sup> Eileen was identified as a young person to be removed by Mounted Constable Sergeant Stott of the Northern Territory Police, and was about nine when taken. There were about ten other girls, of roughly the same age in this group, who were moved with my mother via Illamurta to the native ration depot at Alice Springs.

It is difficult to determine the exact ages of these girls because it took nearly 20 years to register all Aboriginal half-caste births, a long time after the Commonwealth's takeover in 1910. Aboriginal and half-caste births were not routinely registered until the Territory began funding Native Institutions in the late 1920s and 1930s. Even then registration was never fully completed in the Territory, until well after the Second World War.

I discuss briefly the journey from Crown Point cattle property to Alice Springs following my mother's removal by Sergeant Stott. The protector's party travelled from Larapinta to Urapitchira, on to Hermannsburg to deliver the mail, then to Alice Springs, a distance of over 300 kilometres by camel. The country was as hazardous then as it is now with its mountainous terrain; trekking was arduous along the dry sandy river beds, and through rocky gullies and canyons. My mother's journey by camel took about six days because during the trip up from Larapinta, the older Breaden girls from Itikawara, escaped and the progress of the camel caravan was halted for about 48 hours. What may have appeared then as a relatively uninteresting family group travelling to Alice Springs was in reality a sinister exercise of removing children from their blood relatives. For example, my mother's traditional grandfather, Kanaki's brother Paddy Stuart (father of Rupert Max Stuart) and his wife Nada were part of the contingent. Paddy was employed by Sergeant Stott as a 'police tracker' tracking cattle spearers. Like most employed Aboriginal people Paddy also tended the police stock of camels and horses, as well as goats, donkeys, pigs and cows. Paddy's wife Nada went with him to cook for the whole group. It was often the case that girls escaped the camel trains for the bush and trackers were necessary to help police hunt down the 'fleeing youths'.

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8 'Half-Castes in Northern Territory re Training and Employment of', CRS A1, 1926/5350, National Archives of Australia (NAA), Canberra. See Fraser 1993 as guide to National Archives of Australia.

9 'Half-Caste Home, Alice Springs, NT', CRS A659, 1939/1/996, NAA, Canberra.

In Alice Springs my mother became an inmate under the control of Sergeant Stott and Ida Standley. Standley's role was that of matron, appointed by both police and other whites. Her teaching appointment was through the South Australian Education Department. The Aboriginal girls were taken to the police ration depot, also called 'The Bungalow' and the surname Briscoe was added soon after arriving. Because my mother's first language was Marduntjara she was unable to say who her father was. However, other older girls informed the Matron that her father's name was Billy Briscoe. So after 1928 Eileen became Eileen Briscoe in all the institutional records. Ida Standley adopted the custom that if children were unable to either remember or answer questions put by her, the children were simply named after the place from which they were removed if no other information was available. Most children were given European names; for example, those who came from Tennant Creek were given the name Tennant. Those who came from either the Plenty or the Palmer River were registered as Plenty or Palmer.

At first my mother was confined in a collection of tin sheds located at the rear of the Stuart Arms Hotel in Todd Street. After about two years older males and females, including my mother, were moved 40 kilometres west to Jay Creek, to a second 'Bungalow'. The sleeping quarters were not rooms but a large concrete slab covered with a second hand galvanised iron roof. Throughout the period my mother was there this structure was without walls: rain, hail or shine.

The Native Institutions were originally created because of what was perceived as the growing 'half-caste problem'. The population explosion was mainly the result of enforced and sometimes casual sexual relationships between European, Asian and Afghan men and Aboriginal women of all ages. Many of these transport camps created around freshwater were without governance and the children and women suffered throughout their lives as a result of living in places where there was no 'rule of law'. Specific events such as the coming of pastoralists into Central Australia and the railway from Oodnadatta during the period 1880-1929, greatly exacerbated the problem. Some Afghan cameleers did care for their children, by giving money to their mothers or older siblings. To meet their responsibilities some Afghan fathers took their partners and children to the harem-like camps at Marree. The exploding half-caste population, in turn, put pressure on camel depots like Lilla Creek, telegraph stations like Charlotte Waters and rail depots such as Rumbalara, as well as the fringe camps on route to Alice Springs.

Whatever the morally legal and illegal practices of those responsible, Ida Standley moved the children from Mbartuwarintja, Alice Springs to Iwaputarka (Jay Creek), in December of 1929. Illnesses caused by exposure and sedentary living in filth and squalor followed the children to Jay Creek. This shameful situation was highlighted by the Reverend W Morley of the Association for

the Protection of Native Races of Australia and Polynesia who wrote to the Minister for Home Affairs Arthur Blakeley about the conditions that the half-caste children lived under. Morley wrote in November 1929 of

The ... bad conditions ... at the temporary hostel for Half-caste children at [Jay Creek]'. Ida Standley had left for Sydney three months earlier and as: [d]isgraceful as are the conditions under which Mr and Mrs Thorne have had to exist [nothing compares] with the conditions under which the fifty or so Half-caste children have to exist.<sup>10</sup>

Morley's report was written in such a way that he tried to articulate the pain and suffering of the children. It must be remembered, however, that Morley's report captured only the moral and political aspects of what he observed. For a man of religion like Morley, his interests were admirable but he and the Thornes were there to do the bidding of the Protestant Church. Nevertheless, Morley was interested in conveying the Thornes' most important role, which was to keep the children within the boundaries of the institution. Morley believed the Thornes were doing Christian acts, but in keeping with the Department of Native Affairs' edicts. It behoves the historian, however, to put himself in the skins of those children as well as to glean Morley's unspoken feelings.

How did these children cope with the deplorable situation in which they found themselves? There were 48 boys and girls ranging in age from one to 16 years, sleeping in the one room, 24 by 50 feet. To verbalise the answer to this question was impossible for my mother beyond saying: 'that it was a terrible place'. Similarly, many of the older children who had to cope with these conditions were unable to articulate their pain and suffering in later life. The children were prevented from speaking their own languages and were forced to learn English. This meant that most of the younger girls could only communicate by speaking 'pidgin' while the older ones spoke in broken English.

The children had no power at all, apart from Morley's and the press's interest, to resist what was happening to them. Morley pointed to the appalling conditions by reporting that the children slept on burnt lime floors, in buildings of rough wooden frames with dilapidated sheets of corrugated iron for the roof, and suffered exposure at night. Children were issued with only two blankets each, meaning they slept on one while using the other as cover. The food was extremely poor so the children killed wild game and stored it close to the camp, out of sight of staff. Similarly, while hunting for wood they were able to collect wild honey and yams to supplement their meagre diets. After dark two hurricane lamps were the only lighting provided and as such the girls' security was threatened by desperate men. During the day school lessons were equally chaotic with no

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10 'Half-Caste Home, Alice Springs, NT', CRS A659, 1939/1/996, NAA, Canberra.

text books or school supplies. This farrago of shifting the children so far out of town in such poor circumstances was premised on the need to protect half-caste girls from marauding rail and pastoral workers.<sup>11</sup>

The children's plight was exacerbated by the loss of their association with relatives; this alienation in turn affected the children's capacity even more to manage their everyday lives. The children's isolation from their relatives was made worse because relatives were forbidden by law to determine what could or would happen to their children – the basic right that their European overlords enjoyed. Some reservations had been exercised by Dr Cecil Cook<sup>12</sup> over what Davies and Morley had written to Minister Blakeley. Nevertheless he acted positively and instead of being over critical of these two missionaries he tended to use them as a way of finding out the children's health conditions while at the same time gaining everyone's confidence. Minister Blakeley ordered Cook to carry out a medical survey in 1928 at the Bungalow hovel operated by Ida Standley. After the children had been at the Jay for a few years, Davies and Morley complained once more, which prompted Cook to carry out an additional medical survey around these new claims of mistreatment. In this new report Cook recorded that my mother Eileen Briscoe was listed as being treated for an unnamed complaint. I suspect that most of the children suffered from either mild or more serious sexually transmitted infections. Moreover, the survey noted a total of 48 children, 26 girls and 22 boys.

Cook reported on the children's health after reading Davies's article and Morley's letter of complaint, and produced a still more damning health report than either of them.<sup>13</sup> Cook described to the Minister in a more technical way what Davies and Morley had written, yet at the same time, covered up the missionaries' criticisms by claiming that they had made 'careless statements'.<sup>14</sup> Cook was mindful of the poor conditions under which the children lived and supported the government's intention to renovate the old telegraph station as a half-caste institution. In 1933, Eileen along with the other inmates was moved to the renovated 'Old Telegraph Station', the third of the Bungalows. This Bungalow in Alice Springs acted as a holding place for babies and new arrivals, while the Jay Creek institution was mainly for older boys, pregnant women and pubescent girls.

In spite of the moral outrage by the Church and institutions like the press, the white administration held the upper hand everywhere along the arterial route from Port Augusta to Darwin. It erected a system of control to benefit and

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11 'Half-Caste Home, Alice Springs, NT', CRS A659, 1939/1/996, NAA, Canberra.

12 Cook 1925.

13 Article 'Scandal of North', *The Adelaide Mail*, see also, Letter from Rev Morley to A Blakeley MP, 23 November 1929, CRS A659, 1939/1/996, NAA, Canberra.

14 'Half Caste Home, Alice Springs. NT', CRS A659, 1939/1/996, folios 174-182, NAA, Canberra.



reward itself socially, politically and financially. The white population was only a fraction of the combined Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal populations, yet they dominated daily lives and built racial barriers. What this meant was that the children's culture was changed to that of a new European set of beliefs, practices and behaviour by institutional control and education. The 'caste system' was more damaging because the children were segregated from their relatives and forced only to be with their teachers. This caste system left behind by the British was easily adapted and intensified by European civil society established in 'the centre'. This brutal and inhuman class structure had worked in all the colonies since first contact. Europeans held the positions of control, they managed the food, they held the leased lands and they also controlled the water, and regulated the transport system through Afghans and Asians. Finally, these colonists worked closely with the police and co-operated with them to remove as many of the half-caste children as possible thus exonerating themselves from crimes against the laws of the land and the inhumanity they had heaped upon Aboriginal women and children, for the term of their lives. Many Aboriginal women tried desperately to hide or rub charcoal on their babies to make them darker but even this failed to save many from removal.

Thus the design of this system excommunicated half-castes, quarter-castes, quadroons and lastly, 'near-whites'. But what was the origin of this monstrous conspiracy? At Federation in 1901 the Commonwealth government was able to legally by-pass the federal constitutional constraints regarding Aborigines; putting all power over them in the hands of the Northern Territory administration.<sup>15</sup> Special laws were created to allow the Northern Territory to be directly governed by the Governor General. This method of governance meant that delegated responsibilities allowed the Northern Territory administrator to create 'ordinances for wards'. All people governed under these Ordinances (whether black, near-white or white) could be regarded as wards, if declared as such. Legislators were then able to omit the word 'Aborigines' enabling the Commonwealth to legally manage the daily lives of 'wards'.

The application of the 'removal policy' centred on the three Bungalows, as everyone called them. The bungalow system, essentially holding-institutions, allowed white pastoralists and town people across the Northern Territory to either illegally remove or detain Aborigines as they thought fit. By 1918, the Ordinance was renewed, redefining Aborigines and giving,

the Chief Protector [powers] to undertake the care, custody or control of any Aboriginal or half-caste, if in his opinion, it [was] necessary or desirable in the interests of the Aboriginal or half-caste for him to do so.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> McCorquodale 1987: 9.

<sup>16</sup> McCorquodale 1987: 27.

In reality the term 'in the interest of the Aboriginal or half-caste' meant removing children whom the state preferred to refer to as 'unwanted'. What made it easier for white people in the Northern Territory to carry this policy to its ultimate conclusion was that it was administratively divided into two regions, north and south. After 1918 administrators in collaboration with leaseholders began incarcerating half-castes at greater distances from towns. White people have always argued they acted out of moral imperative. To me it was blatant barbarianism.

By April of 1932, as I explained earlier, the Commonwealth Treasury approved the renovations of the Old Telegraph Station for use as a half-caste institution.<sup>17</sup> The changes were soon completed and the children were moved once more to the renovated 'Native Institution'. More changes followed by June of the same year as the Thornes were replaced by other managers. The storm of criticism continued. The strategy of changing the children's culture, ethics, thinking and daily behaviour did not totally pass without notice and comment. Aborigines across Australia suffered from these kinds of colonial policies and as control fell into the hands of Australian rather than British administrators, the practice continued with greater insensitivities. Church bodies took over without legal sanction and without transparent government control. The total absence of any form of reporting system as well as the complete lack of political action in civil society, revealed the nation-wide indifference. In the 1920s and 1930s Ernestine Hill, a white journalist and adventurer, told readers across Australia that libertarianism had become an 'art form' in the hands of 'white male trash' imperialising the Northern Territory under Commonwealth control.<sup>18</sup>

Some of these white people were related by blood to me but I reluctantly discuss my European biological forbears because they, for the most part, rejected and despised Aborigines. I never knew until much later in my life that my father was a white man named Ron Price. Price was the son of a white telegraph station manager and a female pastoralist. The Northern Territory press reported his death in early November 1938, a few days before I was born. As a young person I did sometimes see Alf Price, Ron's brother, who lived with an Aboriginal woman named Annie. Much later Annie's son Desmond and I were at St Francis House together. Yet at the time I never really appreciated, or knew, just how close a relative Desmond was to me. It was to be many years later that I learnt that he was my first blood cousin! However, I have been able to learn something of the pasts of the Price family. Billy Briscoe and Ron Price's mother Isabella were both involved in the events surrounding the Coniston massacre. I feel obliged to discuss the event and the parts they played in this racial conflict after setting the scene of what was happening on the labour front.

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<sup>17</sup> Letter, HA Parkhill, Minister for Home Affairs, Canberra, CRS A659, 1939/1/996, NAA, Canberra.

<sup>18</sup> Hill 1933.

At this time my mother was at the half-caste institution under Ida Standley's care. By now the workings of the *Aboriginal Ordinance 1918* (Cth) was in full flight as pastoral capitalism expanded. The most noticeable change was that there was a shift of control from the police and 'civil society', to that of the Northern Territory administration and the Commonwealth. The 'Resident Administrator' coordinated policy and political activity although Chief Protector Cook had direct every-day control. Interest from Canberra came in the form of more visits from federal ministers mainly due to ultimate Commonwealth financial control.<sup>19</sup> Capitalism by this time was developing at full pace even though profits were low and labour force skills were in short supply: colonial subsidies were used to maintain European white society by providing a cheap untrained black labour workforce. The idea of training half-caste labour was becoming more prevalent.

To remind the reader, land was still totally controlled by the Commonwealth from 1911 until after the Second World War and during this time small pastoralists were prevented from expanding their leaseholds. However, pastoralists at the same time had numbers of Aborigines living on their leases for which they were supposed to provide rations collected from the Police Protector. The pastoralists believed they owned the land, not just leased it, and were angered at Aborigines hunting and moving through the properties. Because of their deep-seated racism white lease-holders saw Aborigines in an ambivalent way, on the one hand, they saw them as 'the devil incarnate' while on the other hand, they saw them as useful free labour; particularly the young women. European attitudes at the time were that if half-castes could be trained by the Commonwealth, then limited payment in kind was acceptable to European employers. Aborigines suffered because they were without leadership or political support; sometimes only having a sympathetic Church and a cynical press.

The watershed came about largely as a result of the political turmoil created by the state-based daily press reporting rumours of killings of Aborigines by white people. The white population felt they had the right to plunder lands, force Aborigines to cease using their own languages and prevent them from crossing their leased property, feeding off their stock and spooking their cattle at water-holes. This coercive action by pastoralists was no more than continuing colonial plunder and in turn caused increasing Aboriginal poverty. The Rumbalara railhead with its European, Afghan and Asian workforce was moving ever closer to Alice Springs and as such was an increasing sexual threat to young Aboriginal women. This was one problem and others were cattle spearing and conflict over Aborigines crossing pastoral leases and these two events came together at the Coniston lease that was temporarily managed by Billy Briscoe.

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<sup>19</sup> 'Visit by Minister for Interior Perkins and Secretary, Department of Interior Brown to Alice Springs', CRS A1, 1933/243, folios 218A-219, NAA, Canberra.

So I come to the Coniston massacre in which all sides of my family were involved. The Board of Inquiry into the 1928 Coniston massacre began in late 1929 and my European relatives gave evidence. What I now know is that on the 7 August 1928, as the half-caste children were about to be relocated some distance from Alice Springs, a man called Frederick Brooks, a dingo trapper, was speared and buried in a rabbit warren at a water hole 22 kilometres west of the Coniston Station homestead.<sup>20</sup> In 1928 Brooks had asked Stafford if he could trap dingoes on the Coniston Station lease, some 250 kilometres from Alice Springs; Stafford agreed. At the time Brooks was cohabiting with a Warlpiri woman. Stafford warned Brooks not to disrespect the bush women and their lore because 'Myalls'<sup>21</sup> to the west had threatened the Aboriginal woman, Alice, for breaking kin rules.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Brooks went to Coniston Station to kill dingoes and asked a Walpiri man, Bullfrog Japanunga, if his wife Marungardi could wash his clothes in exchange for tobacco and food.<sup>23</sup> Brooks attempted to keep Marungardi at the station and when she returned to Japanunga without food or tobacco he attacked Brooks and killed him at what is now known as Brooks' soak. That was the Aboriginal account of events, but Stafford, like many white people in the region, believed Brooks died for nothing and that the subsequent murder of many Aborigines, 17 by the conservative official count, was justified.

In retribution a party of men, including my mother's white father Billy Briscoe, formed a punitive expedition to the site of the killing. At the time Billy Briscoe was also employed by Randall Stafford at Coniston Station lease and knew Brooks from when they both worked in the Lake Eyre region. It was not long after the retribution killings that news came to my mother, at Iwapatarka, that Billy Briscoe was implicated in Mounted Constable Murray's punitive raiding party. These events were significant to the children in the half-caste institution, including my mother as I learned much later, because many Warlpiri were 'mown down summarily' by members of the white and Aboriginal punitive party. Many of the half-caste children were direct blood relatives to those Aborigines killed and many were also blood relatives to the killers.

Documentation shows that Murray proceeded to Coniston Station on 12 August 1928. On 16 August he gathered up an illegal posse comprised of Aboriginal stockman Alick Wilson together with Randall Stafford, John Saxby, Billy Briscoe, three Aboriginal trackers, Paddy, Major and Dodger, together with two prisoners Padigay and Woolingar, who had agreed to show Murray where the nearby Aboriginal bush camp was.<sup>24</sup> Nearing five o'clock in the afternoon the

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20 Wilson and O'Brien 2003: 27, 59-78.

21 Wilson and O'Brien 2003: 63. See chapter notes.

22 Spencer and Gillen 1968[1899]: 119.

23 Read and Read 1999: 35-37.

24 Wilson and O'Brien 2003: 67.

posse came across a party of 23 Aborigines and in true military style Murray moved into the camp ordering them to disarm. Other members testified to the Board that the Aboriginal men and women had no notion of what was being said. Murray attacked them and in what followed: 'four Warlpiri were killed outright, including one woman, and another was wounded and died within four hours, bringing the total killed then to five'.<sup>25</sup>

On 19 August Stafford stayed at the station and the posse went north towards the Tanami where a party of six young warriors were engaged and asked to disarm. Murray claims he was peppered with sticks and boomerangs to within an inch of his life, and he retaliated with his revolver, killing three men and wounding three others. By 22 August the posse had returned to Coniston where two more Warlpiri were killed, together with a young boy who was running away. On 30 August Murray again returned to Coniston where Wooligar died of wounds received around 12 August. The massacre extended into the Tanami desert when Bill Morton, a leaseholder at Broadmeadow Station, shot and killed more Warlpiri.

Briscoe claimed to be innocent of shooting anyone; nevertheless, the Aboriginal perspective has always been that Briscoe was guilty by implication. Stafford admitted shooting someone escaping the scene and discovering that one of the dead persons was a young woman. On 7 September Murray was sent to gather evidence following Morton's report to the Board.<sup>26</sup> The Darwin papers reported in January 1929 that 17 Aborigines had been killed over a period of time during the massacre. Of these, 15 were men and two were women. By May of the same year, the *Sydney Morning Herald* had put the total figure at 33.<sup>27</sup> Supporters, missionaries, protectors and researchers claimed the total deaths could be as high as possibly 300 Walpari people. This number was further substantiated by comments from the Australian Board of Mission.<sup>28</sup>

The Department of Home Affairs conceded that the killing of 17 Aborigines had occurred. The Report criticised Murray for failing to follow proper reporting procedures laid down by the department when reporting events to the minister. Cawood's report was equally spurious because it meant that 'Murray was on the spot, and could have been interrogated by the Government Resident [but was not]'. Similarly it was alleged that Cawood had corrupted the whole process and should have been gaoled for doing so. In addition, the Secretary's memo states that:

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25 Wilson and O'Brien 2003: 68.

26 Letter by Morton in, 'The Findings of the Board of Inquiry into Coniston Killings', CRS A431, 1950/2768, pt 1, NAA, Canberra.

27 Attachment 'Finding of Board of Inquiry into Coniston Killings', exhibit 7, CRS A431, 1950/2768, pt 2, NAA, Canberra.

28 Article 'Aborigines, Recent Shooting', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 1929, CRS A431, 1950/2768, pt 2, NAA, Canberra.

The reports by Constable Murray in regards to the shooting of a native by Tilmouth and in regard to the shooting of aboriginals by the police in connection with the arrest of those implicated in the attack on Morton were also merely forwarded for the Minister's information and without any comment by the Government Resident.<sup>29</sup>

What this implies is that Europeans applied whatever powers were necessary to protect their own interests, whether corrupt or not. It is evident that in many respects the Commonwealth Board of Enquiry was farcical because Cawood was not only the Central Australian Government Resident and a Police Commissioner Board member but also the superior officer of Mounted Constable Murray. In addition, neither followed due process because the pastoral labourers and trackers were never sworn in as 'Special Constables' by Murray.<sup>30</sup> Cawood too, openly expressed his prejudice against Aborigines. The Board was stacked against a fair hearing by the appointment of too many police representatives such as a Queensland police magistrate as chairperson, and a South Australian police Inspector, ensuring a predetermined outcome. Both these men were bound to find in favour of Murray. Wilson and O'Brien argued that a further set of complications affected the case: 'conflicts over land use, the effects of drought and [as already mentioned] the demise of Frederick Brooks'.<sup>31</sup>

Other irregularities and false accusations against Aborigines can be read in the transcripts of the inquiry.<sup>32</sup> It is hard to believe the level of hatred against Aborigines and half-castes by the Europeans. Impressions and some evidence of 30 witnesses were taken, but here I am only interested in the submissions by Mounted Constable WG Murray, Randall Stafford, Billy Briscoe and Isabella Violet Price. And, according to Stafford, Murray possessed a character that oozed with 'bad faith' towards Aborigines.<sup>33</sup> Murray was normally attached to the Alice Springs police station but at the time of Brooks' death in August 1928 was in charge of the Barrow Creek police station. Murray was an unreliable witness, who lied to Inspector Giles. In his report he said that he had 'no police experience' prior to joining the Central Australian Police, and had 'not undergone any course of instruction in Police duties'. In the same paragraph he stated that 'Sergeant Stretton gave him instruction in the art of making a police report. He was very exact and wanted everything explained'.<sup>34</sup>

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29 'The Findings of the Board of Inquiry into Coniston Killings', CRS A431, 1950/2768, pt 2, folio 445, NAA, Canberra.

30 'The Findings of the Board of Inquiry into Coniston Killings', CRS A431, 1950/2768, pt 2, folio 445, NAA, Canberra.

31 Wilson and O'Brien 2003: 60.

32 'Commonwealth of Australia Gazette, no. 138, Friday 4 December 1928', CRS A431, 1950/2768, pt 2, NAA, Canberra.

33 'The Findings of the Board of Inquiry into Coniston Killings', CRS A431, 1950/2768, pt 2, folio 445, NAA, Canberra.

34 Commonwealth of Australia Gazette, no. 138, Friday 4 December 1928', CRS A431, 1950/2768, pt 2, NAA, Canberra.

In addition to police instruction, Murray's real skills were in applying military force, as Wilson and O'Brien attested. They wrote that:

Murray was a military man, a Light Horse veteran of World War I who had also served over seven years in the Victorian Mounted Rifles militia prior to 1914 [Murray served in] the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force with B Squadron of the 4th Light Horse on 20 May 1915 [He landed] at Gallipoli on 24 May 1915 [And he was wounded] on the Western Front ... at Messines Ridge on 7 June 1917.<sup>35</sup>

In the same way Cawood used Isabella Price's submission to denigrate the Aboriginal perspective of the event. Mrs Isabella Violet Price (nee Hesketh) was born in England on 25 April 1877. She was the widow of Frederick Price (1867-1924) who was at one time a manager of the Alice Springs Telegraph Station.<sup>36</sup> On 7 January 1929 she gave evidence to the board of inquiry on the Coniston massacre. The reason I highlight Isabella Price's submission is that her younger son Ronald Price was my biological father. Although I explain about my mother's relationship with Ron Price in more detail later, I find it hard to understand why Isabella Price was asked to give a statement to the Board of Enquiry. Coniston Station was 250 kilometres north-west of the Stuart highway, whereas Woolla Downs, Isabella's property, was in the opposite direction approximately 240 kilometres east, in the Sandover, or Utopia, region. Woolla Downs was a long way from Coniston Station and I believe none of what she said had any bearing on the events covered by the inquiry. The only possible conclusion that can be drawn is that Cawood wanted to influence the other two members of the Board in demonstrating how Aboriginal employees, as well as bush people, frightened whites on the periphery of pastoral expansion. What is more, all that Price could say was that she was growing more afraid of both the Aborigines who worked for her and of those passing through her lease. As she said 'we are always having trouble with them about losing the goats and [bush people] being cheeky'.<sup>37</sup>

According to her transcript, Isabella Price had never shot or killed any Aborigines. However, she did recount times when her daughter Pearl<sup>38</sup> shot at both her Aboriginal shepherds and people in the camp a kilometre away. She added that: 'the blacks [meaning bush people] never came to my house because we keep them at a distance'. What was damning about the statements was that if the Price family used fire-arms to control the Aborigines who worked for them they were hardly the kind of people who would reveal if they shot bush people or not.

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35 Wilson and O'Brien 2003: 66.

36 Bucknall 1990-1996: 171-173.

37 'Attacks on White men by Natives', CRS A431, 1950/2768, pt 2, NAA, Canberra.

38 Mrs Pearl Dixon was Isabella Price's daughter.

Presumably bush people passed through the area, as they did in hunting parties, and trekked to places as far away as Walmatjirri country, over the Western Australian border. From there they would either travel to Warlpiri country in the opposite direction for fire ceremonies or go further on to Urapuntja.<sup>39</sup> Based on Isabella Price's statement it would appear that it was Aborigines who were condemned rather than the marauding police party. It is not difficult, therefore, to understand why Price was asked to make a submission as a way of demonising Aborigines.

The terror of the Coniston killings resonated throughout Alice Springs, as well as the distant Native Institution at Jay Creek. Nor did the events and follow-up inquiry escape the notice of Reverend Davies of the Anglican Church, a representative on the Australian Board of Missions. My mother remembered the European women in town in their long black dresses asking questions about *Wati Kudaitja nga wankapie?* — which in Mardu to the young half-caste girls meant talking about Aboriginal men in ceremonial killings — and the recent massacre. The terror of the Coniston killings permeated the temporary half-caste institution at Jay Creek, and I distinctly remember my mother telling me that all the children were terrified of the *kuthi* (for the Arrernte inmates) or *kurdaitja* (for the Arrabuna and Marduntjara inmates)<sup>40</sup> coming in the night to 'sing' them.<sup>41</sup> At night the children were terrified and, by day, fell into the misery of losing their inheritance because of the influx of the European population into the Alice Springs region.<sup>42</sup>

The Coniston massacre was more extensive, in area and in numbers, than has ever been acknowledged in the 150 or so years of colonial occupation. It may be argued that Aborigines initiated many killings, but the Aborigines suffered more. Normally Aborigines exacted those killings due to some form of agreement that had been broken. Coniston was such a situation treated with contempt by Fred Brooks, a perspective never accepted by Australian courts. Following this incident greater legal controls were put in place controlling the movement not just of half-castes but bush people. Greater protection from the conflicts was given to colonists, but never to Aborigines no matter whether they were of full- or mixed descent. These aspects of race policies created to control people of full- and mixed descent are important in understanding the circumstances into which my mother was raised and into which I was born in November 1938.

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39 'Attacks on White men by Natives', CRS A431, 1950/2768, pt 2, NAA, Canberra.

40 Traditional clever man.

41 The term is an English word used to put a spell on people.

42 Article 'Scandal of North', *The Adelaide Mail*, CRS A659, 1939/1/996, pt 1, NAA, Canberra.