

Yamakarra! Liza Kennedy and the Keewong Mob

compiled by Western Heritage Group

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It is invigorating to see an imaginative new approach to writing history and cultural understanding that totally engulfs a reader in the world of the writer. *Yamakarra! Liza Kennedy and the Keewong Mob* certainly achieves this. This respectful, informative and insightfully produced work reflects the conscious endeavours of its creators to write history 'our people's way' rather than emulate white ways of recounting history. Based around the stories of Ngayampaa elder Aunty Liza Kennedy, and constructed around a series of camping trips, *Yamakarra!* (*yamakarra* is a term of greeting) takes the form of a conversation in which many voices participate. The reader is invited to 'sit around the campfire' with the 'Keewong Mob' as their story unfolds.

Inspired by the work of linguist Tamsin Donaldson with Aunty Liza and other elders, the Western Heritage Group, who produced this book, followed up on Aunty Liza's stories through personal visits. These were read and reflected on during camping trips in Ngayampaa country, the area between what is now Cobar and Ivanhoe in western New South Wales. The group refer to themselves as Aboriginal rather than Indigenous, reflecting a preference across much of New South Wales.

Participants are introduced by way of a photo montage at the beginning of the book, and photographs are put to good use throughout. They are used to illustrate who is speaking, what is being discussed and where events are taking place. They also effectively emphasise the merging of past and present, both during these camping trips and as an ongoing feature of Aboriginal experience.

The book is organised thematically, with chapters focusing on belonging, heritage, strong survivors, determination, and celebration. However, all these themes are interwoven throughout the text. The facts, memories, thoughts and experiences within the book are presented in verbatim conversational style, as though being revealed during the camping trips. The strategy works well. It also allows the book to be read cover to cover or dipped into. These chapters are complemented by informative end pages.

The strong visual component includes not only photos but also graphs, diagrams, artworks, maps and historic documents. The text too uses various styles, incorporating a smorgasbord of dialogue, oral history, memories, stories, reflections, quotes, songs, language, beliefs, poetry and genealogies. It goes well beyond oral history, drawing on the findings of anthropologists, historians and linguists. Linguist Tamsin Donaldson, anthropologist Jeremy Beckett, and historian Heather Goodall are very much a part of the conversation which unfolds – not just as experts in their respective fields, but as trusted friends who have been involved in mutually beneficial and ongoing cultural exchanges with the Keewong Mob.

This dialogic approach is a major strength of a book that embraces rather than overlooks an entwined social history. The information recorded by anthropologists and linguists, specifically Beckett and Donaldson who worked with previous generations of the Keewong Mob, is highly valued by people for whom traditional methods of knowledge transmission were severely compromised. When one participant says she wants to tap into Tamsin's head to get hold of her language knowledge, it is a reminder that in this community, like so many others, language transmission was interrupted to such an extent that younger generations may have little or no ability to speak it. Yet with the help of linguistic information gathered in the past, and the skills and long-term commitment of linguists such as Donaldson, language can be revived, and the voices of the elders and ancestors brought to life for the younger generations, as well as the reader, as happens here.

Where required, background information is incorporated into the dialogic form, which while not always sounding genuinely verbatim, is consistent with the style of storytelling adopted in the text. In this way, the voices of the academic speakers are included where relevant, even if the speaker concerned was not on the particular camping trip in which the information is embedded.

It is this element of cultural exchange that is so often misinterpreted and misrepresented in Native Title cases, in which there is often an underlying assumption that Indigenous claimants 'read up on the past' in order to claim a continuity of cultural practice and knowledge that they do not actually hold, and which can therefore be discounted in a legal context. This text demonstrates

a very different side to that story, in which the white participants who have successfully gathered knowledge from Indigenous people in the past can now act as intermediaries between generations of people for whom previous forms of knowledge transmission has been denied in one way or another. Jeremy Beckett's work with the ancestors of some of the participants, and Heather Goodall's historical research are not the source of the Keewong Mob's cultural identity. This research nevertheless helps fill gaps in people's knowledge that are an inevitable result of waves of disruptions to their own forms of life. As Doolan points out, 'better to learn things from archives and anthropologists than not at all' (p. 119). Which is to say that Aboriginal people see it as legitimate to learn from various pasts, oral and written, as do non-Aboriginal people. The approach of this book is a reminder that genuine understanding between people starts at the level of individual relationships and a willingness to listen. What might have been seen as past appropriations are transformed into a supportive contemporary dialogue, and dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is in turn identified as a step towards reconciliation.

The campsite, as presented in this text, becomes a place where knowledge recorded in the past is brought to life in the present by and for the people to whom it is most meaningful. How that knowledge is handed down is less significant than the knowledge itself. Knowledge is power, and this work explicitly reflects the participants' attempts to access and regenerate cultural knowledge and practices in order to strengthen themselves and future generations. This is demonstrated through the revival of cultural practices such as hand stencilling, rituals enacted to welcome babies to the country of their ancestors, and the return of the ashes of the deceased to their traditional country.

The text has been designed in a way which makes it highly accessible to a wide audience. The beautiful photography, the conversational tone, the inclusion of diagrams, and poetry and songs all work together to make it a visually appealing text. However, there is a danger that because the text is deliberately non-academic in style and structure, the more academically oriented reader may overlook it. This would be a mistake: *Yamakarra!* incorporates a great deal of historical information about the region and the people concerned, as well as the impact of change, and Aboriginal responses to these changes over time. More significant still is its nuanced teasing out of culturally based understandings of laws and traditions, and of the relations between people (both past and present) and the country, creator beings, spirits and ancestors from whom their identity is derived.

We highly recommend this book to scholars and general readers interested in Aboriginal life, history and culture. It would make an excellent gift for teenagers and adults.

Ultimately, *Yamakarra*'s intention is to pass on a message of strength and hope from past generations to those of the present and future. While it does not shy away from discussing the trauma of forced dispersals, removals and disruptions to the culture and lives of Aboriginal people in the past, and mourns the lack of choice Aboriginal people were faced with, the clear message it conveys is that Aboriginal people are now much better able to make the choice to actively connect with their cultural identity and live in a way that is culturally meaningful to them.

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