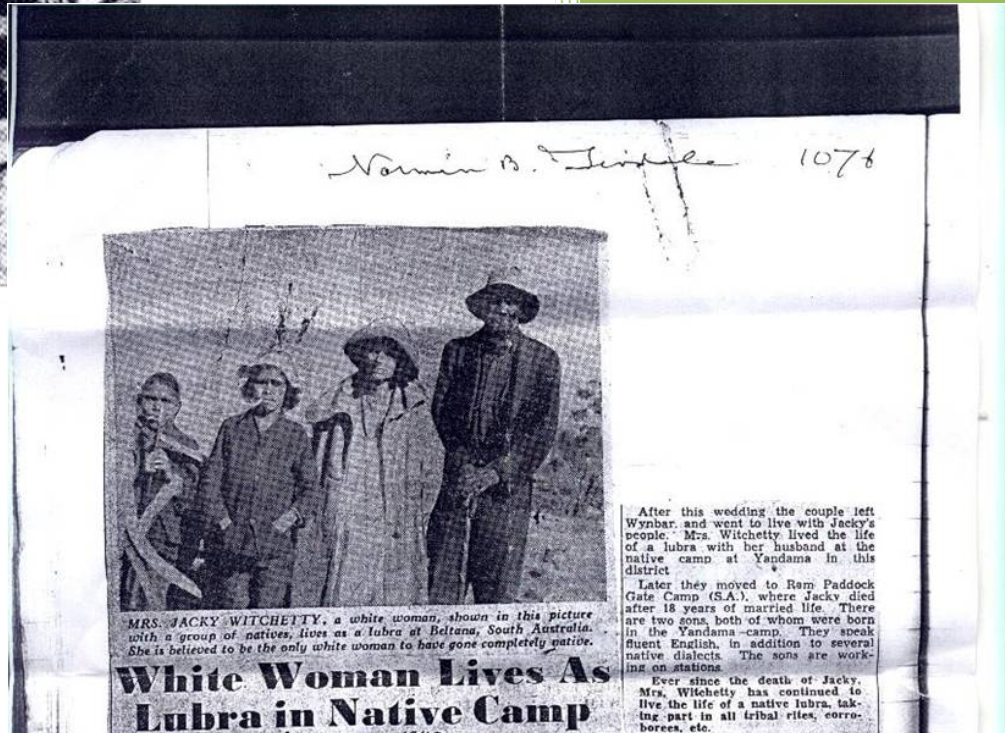




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Thesis Title:

White Lives in a Black Community: The lives of Jim Page and Rebecca Forbes in the Adnyamathanha community

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Life Writing Chapter Four

Finding Jack

Western NSW, 2004

West was where I had to go, as Becky did, to find her Aboriginal man. His name would be Jack, of course. But who was he, and what traces of him could possibly be found in a region that had teased whitefellas with gold and refreshment ever since men like Lasseter and Stuart had melted in its unchartered mirages? I knew Jack would emerge into Becky's life at *Winbar*, a sheep station on the upper Darling, where he taught the manager's wife Edie Warwick Paakantyi, the language of the Barkindji river tribe. But the grandmothers at nearby Louth called themselves Gurnu. I knew that Jack's marriage certificate said he was born at 'Adelaide', the stock route gate on the Queensland border, that might be Wangkumara country. I knew that when anthropologist Adolphus Peter Elkin met Jack in the Flinders Ranges some years later, he scratched his name under the list of Yadliaura, one of the Adnyamathanha sub-groupings.¹ But Granny Gertie had said 'No, he's not one of us, he's Piladapa, from Moolawatana way, on the South Australian border with New South Wales.'² Another anthropologist, Norman Tindale called that area Wadikali on the map he drew up in 1974. Other languages Jack may have spoken would give no further clues of origins, although they may trace his relationships to country and kin.³ I knew Jack was born in the desert, worked on the river, and died in the ranges. I wanted to know more about the man Becky would marry.

I didn't find anyone who knew him out west. Instead, I was introduced to George Dutton, in a folder of articles by Jeremy Beckett and others, that Brad Steadman produced on the

verandah of his house in Brewarrina. George, he remarked, had told one anthropologist he was Malyangaba⁴ (Maliangaba?⁵ Maliangapa?⁶) yet to another he had not mentioned it; it must have depended on the context of the question he was asked. Was it about where he'd come from? Or his parents or his uncles? Or his 'meat'? Or his blood? Or his skin?⁷ Was he asked to explain his identity in terms of where and who made him *Wiljaru*,⁸ complex itself because he went through more than one initiation in different areas, and as he said himself, 'which form they followed depended on who was running it', as the survivors of several different groups and initiation rites had joined together by 1905, due to the decimation of individual tribal groups.⁹ And George was said to have spoken forty lingos, and worked on stations from the Flinders to the Channel Country to Broken Hill, depending on the seasons and the ceremonial responsibilities he had at the time.¹⁰

I was beginning to get the picture. An Aboriginal man's identity is built of experience and history, not just origins and tribal classifications like a static display in a natural history museum. Like a palimpsest, layers of identity are inscribed on the one body, different scripts, but each message discernible through the others, never entirely erased.¹¹ Another local researcher, Sarah Martin agreed: 'every person saw themselves belonging to a number of groups or "layers".' Linguist Luise Hercus said it this way:

The whole of this large portion of New South Wales ... was all occupied. It was occupied by local groups who each had their section of country, but at the same time belonged to a larger group. So when asked about their background people might either give the smaller or the bigger identity, and this has led to a lot of confusion.¹²

Indeed.

Brad had one more lesson for me. He said that anthropologists inherited their obsession for the purity of races and tribes from the Bible, from the Israelite concern for racial purity in their 'twelve tribes of Israel'.¹³ The desire to demarcate 'types' and hence predict and explain

their behaviour, proceeded on the basis of oppositions: us, them; we, they; the Chosen Ones, the Others. But Aboriginal people did not think in hierarchies. They lay the world on its side and walked the lie of the land, getting a horizontal view of things. Brad held out his hand to shake mine. The light was failing and I still had to drive back to Louth. I felt so inadequate with my thank yous, after the gift he had given me.

Adelaide Gate, 1860s

In the early 1860s, Mary gave birth to a boy child at the Adelaide Gate, on the Queensland /New South Wales border, some fifty miles north east of Tibooburra. The place has no gate yet, because there are yet to be fences between states; yet to be bold lines across the twenty-ninth parallel and down the hundred and forty-first line of longitude, marking off the distance of this colonial province from the center of the world at Greenwich. Small travelling groups of white men have been floundering in the region for the best part of the last two decades. The place Mary lays her babe is a soak along the *mura* tracks of the ancestors, which still lead their people past the watered places, and along which white men will soon follow black men and make notes to return to dig bores and sink tanks.¹⁴ Then cattle will drain along the edible swathes from Queensland to the markets in Adelaide to the south, or to the meat works at Bourke, or from there on the trains to Sydney. Mary's son, growing up to see the tides of cattle trickle then pour through the land, will learn to call the place 'Adelaide'.¹⁵

At Adelaide, before the Gate, the wind sweeps the plain, wearing it down to its naked flesh- coloured face. Brave grey hakeas tremble as air rushes through them; small red berries shifting slightly on the low ruby saltbush. The wind doesn't howl; its voice is as constant and varied as the blue of the sky, a whisper at the horizon but as deep as an ocean wave rolling

over the place Mary holds her baby, beside a smoking pile of dogwood leaves. Perhaps she has made the trek to the *Garouli*, the three stone uncles to whom new babies are presented.¹⁶ Her baby wears a tribal name, as does his father, although it will not stick in the world that is poised to enter the place and call it a gate.

Grasses and kurumba grow along the rough gutters of the dried up river overflows and swamps.¹⁷ Mary pounds the seeds, trickling grain from one hand onto the flat grinding stone and tap! tap! smashing them with a small rock in the other. The sound is light for all that, and a comforting rhythm for the child beside her. The clay coating of the dark hut muffles the wind, and its semicircular form ducks under the storms.¹⁸ The fire by the low opening makes it smoky, and keeps away the flies.

Jack and his father are sharing jerboas in the close gloom of the hut, the man squeezing flesh from the singed flesh into his own mouth, and offering what is left to his infant son. Mary works by the fire, tap, tap, tap, tap, quickly separating flour and husks. When it is enough she mixes some water, some ash, pats it into a cake, and clearing a space on the coals, puts the damper on the fire.

She gets up, and bends over to walk through the hut opening into the glare, hand over her eyes for a moment. She picks up the axe lying with her husband's spears, and heads towards the clump of trees. The tool is nearly worn to its eye, but it can still break a branch better than her knee, better even than the dark grey rock they used to use. The axe handle is very smooth, and black from sweat and animal fat. It was already that way when fellows from beyond the lakes in the West had brought it to them, trading for grinding stones.¹⁹ It had come with terrifying stories of huge animals with four legs, and men white as dead men sitting on top of them, who made fire out of little sticks and gave soft pieces of skin redder than the best ochre. They used a loud noise to kill kangaroos further than the best spear could reach.²⁰ The

visitors had danced them these things, their shadows long and ominous in the firelight. Mary smiles to herself as she methodically cuts the kindling, remembering her own fear at these stories when she was a girl. Now they all knew about horses and *gubbas*, matches and cloth for clothes--and guns. From those fleeing the guns on the river, and her own sister, Polly, coming east along the *mura* tracks along the Yandama creek, news traveled fast. West of the salt lakes, Polly said, hairy creatures called sheep had come to the waterholes, and women and children were whipped by the white men to keep away.²¹ Mary shivers, remembering the talk last ceremony time at Yandama. Of course the *yuras* had revenged their women, but police came and took them to another country further south, where they died. Next time police came, they bought flour and sugar and would give it, if you looked after those sheep. 'The country was so dry, even our old father did it', Polly had whispered to her wide eyed sister, 'but then Nukunu killed him, Nyanga.'²² Mary had said nothing, so Polly finished the tale: 'That's when Bob said Oh, me and Judy and the *yakartis* come with you go see that sister across the sandhills, and she come with us and sit down Yandama ceremony time.' Their families had lived close together at the Yandama camp, sharing husbands, and children, and news of the mad *gubbas* blundering through the country. The *gubbas* even camped on the waterhole near Nganja, *Guba Walga*, the old White Lady, until it was only mud and bad, and the animals wouldn't go near, and there would be nothing for the pelican to drink on his way to Coongie this time.²³ Maybe that's why that Poole died there

When the hunting parties came – *gubbas* on horseback²⁴ - Polly and her family returned east to take their chances; Mary returned to her husband's country, north of the *gubbas* sheep, and south of the black troopers; here where there are seeds to grind and wood for fires, and just this trickle of whitefellas.

Finishing her task, Mary slings from her shoulders the net she has been carrying and carefully lays the cut branches across it. Then she picks up its tough brown twined edges and heads back to her camp to stow the pile inside the small hut next to her own, along with their stores of seeds, and dried fruits. She sings as she walks, and the wind whips away the sounds and spread them over the land:

The tomahawk falls

The tomahawk falls

And the wood is cut into small pieces

Jack's Journeys, 1880's – 1910's

Mary's son grows up knowing all this, and more. He calls the Three Brothers *ga:gu*, brother, after he is made a man, a *Wiljaru*.²⁵ The white men call him Jack when they give him a horse to ride, and ask him to ride south with them behind their big mob of cattle, and with his uncles. The white men give him flour that needs no grinding, and tea to drink with white sugar sweeter than anything he found in a tree or an ants nest. They give him meat too, any season. As he has always done, he learns the language of these people he travels with, and learns their ways of boiling water, wearing clothes, doing things 'right way'. He tells them too where the feed will be, and water on the long stages, and keeps them away from places where the spirits would be angry. His uncles point out the *mura* tracks, and signs, and show him how to keep the places properly, and sing the country as he goes through, and made sure he knows his relations in every camp. Sometimes he leaves the cattle, staying at *Wonnaminata* and other places for ceremony.²⁶ They like him in the camps, dancing corroboree of all the things he had seen: men fencing and sinking bores, Afghans and their camels, spearing cattle.

²⁷ Sometimes the camps are small, like the survivors of poisoned flour at Coongie Lake, or

those who escaped retaliations for stealing cattle on the Bulloo. With communities on the move, fragmenting, gathering, splintering, forging new connections, Jack learns what he can, becoming a man in so many ways. Perhaps he participates in a number of initiations in different countries.²⁸ He doesn't just ride horses, he breaks them, and races them; he mends fences, builds yards, and brands cattle; he shears sheep and the white shearers slap him on the back and eat with him.²⁹ He even feeds the wool into the clanking metal scours assembled on the inland river banks to send clean light fleece to Goolwa then Sydney. The pace of change is exhilarating, if fragile, and at times Jack feels he can have it all.

Somewhere along the way Jack marries, and he takes his family to his mother's country, where she is camped with her sister Polly and Mount Serle Bob in the rocky hills west of the lake.³⁰ A son is born at Angepena, but his wife dies, leaving Mary to rear her grandson on the rations at nearby Mt Serle depot.³¹ Jack moves on in the 1890 drought, returning years later to see his son become *Vadnapa* in the first stage initiation. Young Arthur takes after his father and goes colt breaking and droving, south through the ranges to Hawker.³² The next time Jack comes to Angepena, though, it is to see the place his son was buried.³³

Jack is a man, but with no wife, and no children. He watches Polly's strong McKenzie children, becoming leaders and with families of their own. When he leaves, he promises he'll be back, 'This time', he says, 'with a white woman.'

'No, you wouldn't get a white woman', they scoff, and think he is making a joke at his own expense.³⁴

Jack travels to Adelaide, breaking horses from the Birdsville Track for the soldiers in India. Then he makes his way past Broken Hill, and some say he broke his leg there, and was nursed back to health by a sweet English nurse he'd like to marry, but that legend dries up

with the droughts that drive Jack and so many others off the stations and picking for gold over Milparinka fields.³⁵ When the season breaks he chases the plentiful work on the riverfronts, travelling upstream from Wilcannia, scouting for jobs in the station horse yards, and for a wife.

It was all his country now, in one way or another.³⁶ He had shared fires with them all: the Naualko along the Barka river,³⁷ Purundji north on the Paroo, Wanjiwalku in the back country, Wadikali in the corner country, and Wiljakali at the broken hill in the Barrier Ranges. Now he was with Barkindji, Barindji, Ngemba, Gurnu moving along the banks of the Barka, flowing in its trench ripped out by the giant, and filled by Coolooberroo's stolen water from the Paroo. Women, right skin for him, come to sit quietly by him in the evenings as he watches the milky water slide by, murmuring stories to him.

'That's Bytchooka coming up now, he's fat with *wityari* grubs tonight, but the black men will come and eat him up by and by till there's nothing left but his white rib.'

'No one's eating me,' he might be saying, joking for his name in those parts, which was '*Wityari*', from his mothers language *yura ngarwala*.³⁸ That word had travelled even wider than he had, so that even whitefellas on the coast knew about that edible white grub.

'Witchetty Jack' they call him, when he stands on the edge of their wide back verandahs, dark face lowered and with a swag of trades to offer at the Big House, or around the yards, or out at the shepherd's huts, like so many other black and white, brown and yellow men traveling the inland tracks, looking for work.

At *Winbar* station on the banks of the Parka, Witchetty Jack finds work as the coltbreaker for the mad horses that even Edie Warwick can't tame.³⁹

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Life Writing Chapter Five

‘She’s going to marry one...’: Jack and Rebecca’s Wedding

Quorn, 2001

Just how and when Becky Castledine made her way out of Sydney to the west of New South Wales, I can’t tell you, but by 1913 she’s at Winbar Station, west of Bourke, on the Darling River. I’ve poked around libraries and archives and the corners of brains, but that’s the best that records and memory can do. Becky’s granddaughter was in no doubt as to *why* she went west: ‘My grandmother reckoned, Rebecca reckoned, if she meets her first Aboriginal man she’s going to marry one. I think she done that.’⁴⁰

Adelaide, 2003

‘Oh yes,’ I’m told, by Mary Woods, in her neat fibro house in suburban Adelaide, ‘Yes, Mrs Forbes had an ambition of marrying a full blood much to the dismay of her family in England.’⁴¹ Mrs Woods grinned, remembering the cups of tea she shared at Mrs Forbes table in Nepabunna, breaking her trip to or from the station where she and her husband worked. ‘She had an ambition of marrying a full blood ... she never did give any indication that she regretted the move,’ Mary told me, earnestly, and poured me another cup of tea.⁴²

Western NSW, 1913

From Sydney, you take a train west, falling off the edge of the world as the train zigzags down the Great Dividing Range and into the plain below. Then the line runs away forever north-west towards the heart of the continent, jostling and jolting endlessly across the flat

'waste howling wilderness' towards the dreaming sky. 43 Becky watches the pink earth turn as the train passes, and tries to imagine Charlie Bean's promise that in a good season, the inland would look like the Motherland.

The train stops at the Bourke railway station, but the passengers carry on, flooding across the sea of red dirt that passes for a street towards a watering hole, their next stage of travel 'Back'o'Bourke, or both. Steam sighs in the boilers of trains and paddlesteamers alike, restless for their next fares. The milky Darling itself does not wait, but slips away west along its ditch.

Becky's first port'o'call is the London Bank, which is closed. Her savings will have to wait for another day. She has little more luck at the post office: she is not surprised nothing waits for her, given her sisters protests at her plans, but is disappointed anyway. So she drifts towards the pubs like the rest of the passengers have, but in order to book her next journey.

'The Carriers Arms' has low-slung awnings which embrace the corner of the street, slouching even this early in the day. Becky dips below the verandah and through the dark doors, her eyes adjusting to the sudden dark. It is quiet for a moment as the men at the bar take her in, then, having decided about her, raise their glasses and voices once more.

'Ma'am?' the young man behind the bar inquires.

'Ah, Miss, sir, and I'm hoping for a ride with the mail coach to Winbar station.' He slides her a timetable, takes her fare, and pencils her name down on a piece of paper.

'Luggage?' he asks.

'At the station. One sea chest, and a rocking chair.'

'Righto.' He juts his chin. 'Pick you up there then,' he says without looking at her, and turns to another customer along the long bar. Becky is glad to return to the sunlight, and the next leg of her journey.

The Mail coach stops at Louth, and the driver and other passengers are quickly soaked up by the four pubs that perch along the high banks of the low Darling river. The soft hanging leaves of the huge gums lining the river banks move with the slow breeze, and Becky smells the tang of eucalypt mingled with the sickly sweet scent from the cordial factory, and the yeasty warmth of the several bakeries. For all this, she is told, Louth was not a town, but a land grant of one TA Matthews, a blacksmith, among other things, from County Louth in Ireland. Two monstrous wool scourers on the river banks near the small wharf lie quiet like sleeping dogs, and she wonders when they might be cranked into life for the wool of the station that lies all around TA's town. Becky tries to imagine a boundary fence all the way to the distant blue hills, but her gaze is taken by something much closer, and she sets off towards it.

Becky reaches a small cemetery, and looming some twenty feet high at its centre, is a huge granite cross. She reaches out to stroke its smooth granite, and trace the marble heart hung at its base. She reads:

'Sacred to the memory of Mary Matthews, the wife of Thomas A Matthews of Louth, who departed this life August 15th 1868 aged 42 years. Dearly beloved by all who knew her. A virtuous wife and indulgent mother. May she rest in peace.'

Forty-two years old. I'm not far from that, Becky thinks. But nobody knows me here, and I'm no good wife or mother, either. I wonder poor dear did she ever think she would lie in peace out here? She tilts her head towards the head of the Cross. *And no reason to think her rough, or wanton or out of the ordinary, like them books make out.*⁴⁴ *Well, she'll be remembered anyway, with a grave like this one,* and Becky smiles, warmly, at the ghost of Mary Matthews, before making her way back to the town and the waiting wagon.

Becky jolts and sways with the mailbags on the cart as they lurch away from the Dan O'Connell Hotel, preparing to relax to the strange rhythm. Suddenly a light blazes in the gathering dusk, and she gasps.

'What was that?' she asks, startled.

'Mary Matthew's cross,' replies the driver. 'Does that every night, unless it's cloudy. On the anniversary of her death shines right to the door of her old home.'⁴⁵

Becky watches the settlement for a time, until the evenings procession of mauves and pinks and blues and brilliant orange playing across the western sky draws her attention away and she turns to face the road. Maybe I'll find my home shining out here somewhere, she thinks, as the light fades and the sky fills with stars.

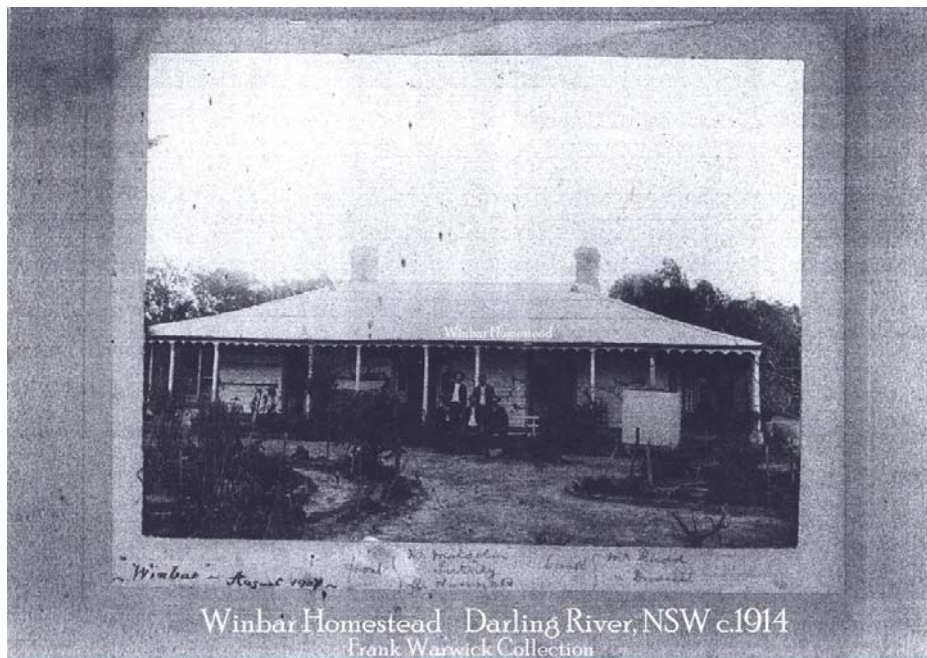
They arrive at lodgings at the Stoney Creek Hotel when the bar is already rowdy. Becky takes her meal in her room, but can still hear the talk through the thin walls. Weather, of course: dust storms that reared like an army across the land and brought grit into every corner and every mouth and made sandy burial mounds of sheep in their paddocks. And floods that made sticky gray mud of the river roads that would hold wheel or hoof fast till the next rains. And wool: '*...prices aren't what they could be. Need a war for that.*' Then laughter and calls for another shout. A girl bustles in to take her dinner things, and is full of her own stories she likes to scare visitors with.

'You hear of them Howells? Mrs Howell, burying her six year old daughter and then her husband who died of a broken heart. True. And that woman carrying her sick son miles through the bush to the pub here for help, even though he died on the way. Oh, it's hard out here, break your heart. Where you to then?'

Becky gives a brief reply, sinking into tiredness and wishing the girl would leave. When she does, Becky is soon asleep, and dreaming of children disappearing through the wall of leaves along the river bank, and they will not come back, no matter how long she calls.

Becky is beginning to feel the prickle of sweat down her back as the day heats up, when the driver turns off the track towards the river, and gardens and a homestead resting in a pool of shade appear through the scrub. Winbar homestead is a generous timber residence, skirted by verandah awnings that are held high by white posts and trimmed with hand carved scalloped edges.⁴⁶ A Chinese gardener ushers Becky towards the front verandah, and returns to help the driver with her things, smiling all the while.

‘Come in!’ Becky hears as she stands by the door, and so she does.



Photography courtesy of Frank Warwick

Winbar Station, 2004

Winbar station was a drive inland, towards the Rankin Ranges, on the high ground where the floods would not reach the cool set of transportable buildings that made a home for the young family running Winbar Station. They knew where the old Winbar Station had been, and drew me a map to find it, right on the river, they said.

It certainly was. The plan of the house was clear from the foundations on the ground, and the cellar was still intact. I think Becky could have thrown a stone from the rear courtyard to the river, were the black wattles not as dense in her time. The station buildings strung out along the bank: men's quarters to the east of the homestead; vegetable gardens, chook yards, stables, round yard, cattle yards, and finally sheep pens strung out to the west. Barges would have tied up on the river bank gums and stock and other cargo loaded straight on or off depending on the height of the river. But there was something missing. Where was the 'blacks camp' for the station workers who were not privy to the mens or overseers quarters? I walked past the rails of the stock yards, and the ground became gullied where rain turned the soft earth to runnels leaking into the river bank. I scrambled through it, the powdery dirt making pale gray prints on my legs where I stumbled and climbed. I noticed a few bits of rusted wire, and some bottles. On the other side, the flat claypans held a series of shallow ponds, and nearby, amongst some low trees, was a dishevelled collection of wrecked mattresses, tin, wire mesh, cut down oil drums and posts, arranged in more or less concentrated piles in the more shaded spots. Here was the camp Jack might have stayed in, across the gully and out of sight of the station buildings but close enough to hear the work bell or the overseer calling out when work was on.

Winbar Station, 1913

A beautiful woman with bright eyes and hand outstretched walks towards Becky, who is standing on the deep verandah.

'I'm Mrs Warwick. Edith. Edie. Lovely. I'll show you around,' and Becky is brisked through the house, catching words and phrases that Edie tosses over her shoulder, and flanked by five small and inquisitive children, until a younger woman, introduced simply as 'Mu' calls them away.

There is bright white linen on the beds; small, white glass jars on the dressing tables; tablecloths and polished wooden chairs with plump cushioned seats in the dining room; and even a dinner set laid out prettily on the dark wood sideboard: a greenish pattern with sheep like a countryside scene in England. *Only I've never seen sheep on any of the china in Islington!* Becky thinks, but does not venture to say anything yet. The tour ends in the cool rear courtyard, and Edie lists Becky's chores. 'Cooking and washing, mainly, for the house and for the men,' she says, waving towards the laundry and kitchen areas. 'And keep an eye out for those children, if you can.'

Each day, Becky moves in and out of doors, passing smells of soap and steam, the soft aroma of rising damper, the bite of beef dripping, and the acrid scent of dust and sweat on men at smoko and dinner. Dark girls bring water from the pumping station and their brothers and cousins bring wood for the kitchen range. She feeds the station hands at the long wooden table in the mess by the kitchen, and takes tucker to the Aboriginal workers outside, where they sit and wait and take it from her on tin plates.

Several times a day, when the children moon around the kitchen, Becky takes up the chook bucket and hands each child some food scraps, and they set off to feed the fowls. She waves at Mr Turner in the store, and might have a word about what they will be needing next.

Often as not, Edie is at the stables as they go past, or in the stock yards on the other side, breaking in her colts, or watching the men break in the wild ones, or the crazy ones. The chooks fuss about the scraps the children let drop morsel by morsel, and Becky lingers in the shade of the spreading coolibah tree, watching her boss. Mrs Warwick is relaxed amongst the men at the stockrails, who are careful with their language, and remember to tip their hats. They know she can sink a bottle bobbing in the river with one shot, and is a fine horsewoman. Today Edie is watching the station coltbreaker, Jack Forbes, calm a young horse in the yard, and calls him over to the rail to tell him something. Becky notices the way that tall dark Jack leans over to listen to his boss's missus, and nods. As he turns back to the horse, he looks past Edie, and Beck sees him gaze straight at her for the briefest of moments. Then the children are rushing past her out of the chook pen, and she swings up her bucket and snibs the rickety gate behind her as she follows. Ah Lee the Chinese gardener is holding a bowl of fresh picked strawberries above the children's outstretched arms, and laughing. *He spoils those children*, Becky thinks, remembering the beautiful little pair of Chinese slippers he had given one of the girls. She laughs back at him, and casts a glance towards the stockyards, but Jack is talking to the horse as if nothing else existed in the world.

It is a shock to Becky the first time she sees Jack in the courtyard. He has taken a block of wood from the woodpile where she takes the men dinner, and is sitting on it, while Edie beside him leans forward in one of the chairs from the back verandah. She has a notebook on her knee and a pencil in her hand. Jack wears his work clothes, his dark work pants shiny from the saddle, his waistcoat hanging over a dusty shirt, boots on, his hat in his hand. Becky, on her business about the courtyard, hears Mrs Warwick ask,

'Can you say that again, more slowly please?' and Jack answers in a soft, tumbling rush of sounds.

With her hands in the bread dough but her ear to the door, Becky listens to the words and their translation, rolling her tongue silently behind her teeth and to the back of her mouth, moulding words so only she could hear them. *Mattels. Knimbah. Win-gah?* Later, working alongside Edie in the house, Becky listens to her boss teaching herself to remember what she has written down: *Knattawery – Knangy, Knattawery – Knangy, Knattawery – Knangy. Eturing, eturing, eturing*⁴⁷.

Adelaide 2002

There are moments in research that are pure gold. This was one. Frank Warwick was Edie's son, and he remembered his childhood well, and had prepared for my visit with photographs of the old Winbar homestead and floor plans. Then he reached into his folder for something else. He produced a typed document that was a copy of language notes his mother had made, taught to her by 'Jack Witchetty'. Edie's phonetics made eccentric spellings, but the language is identifiable as Paakantyi⁴⁸:

| | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Mother = <i>ummaga</i> | My Mother = <i>Ummagi</i> |
| Father = <i>Combrama</i> | My Father = <i>Combi</i> |
| Sister = <i>Wardaga</i> | My Sister = <i>Wardagi</i> |
| Brother = <i>Cockaga</i> | My Brother = <i>Cockagi</i> |
| Sweetheart = <i>Mattels</i> | Tea = <i>Turee</i> |
| Sugar – <i>Muno</i> | also bread and flour |
| Meat = <i>Wonga</i> | Head = <i>Thurdo</i> |
| Forehead = <i>Bicka</i> | Eyebrow = <i>Bicka boolta</i> |
| Eye = <i>Makey</i> | Eyelashes = <i>Makey boolta</i> |
| Hair = <i>Boolta</i> | Nose = <i>Mindola</i> |
| Lips = <i>Mimmee</i> | Teeth = <i>Knungee</i> |
| Tongue = <i>Thurlinga</i> | Hand = <i>Murrah</i> |
| Nails = <i>Millenah</i> | Elbow = <i>Coopah</i> |
| Knee = <i>Thingee</i> | Foot = <i>Thinnah</i> |
| Too much to say = <i>Combiah Yelka</i> | |
| House = <i>Boong-gah</i> | Camp = <i>Yuppurryh</i> |
| No = <i>Knattawery – Knangy</i> | |
| Yes = <i>turing</i> | You = <i>Knimbah</i> |

Make haste = *Calyhr Bupperry*
Go on = *Woorah Bury* Where = *Win-gah*

Where is my dress = *Windurah Comber*
Where are you going = *Windurah Knimba Bury*
Why don't you talk sense = *Knun inah knimba coulpra toulaga*
Give me flour = *Sngoha munno*
You don't say so = *Knuninah Yennate*
Come with me (child) = *Burrey lay mutpa*
What woman's that = *Guthee minnah nonga*
Where is your dog = *Windurrah knimba cullie*⁴⁹

I could have kissed him.

Winbar Station, 1913

Sometimes, when all her chores are done for the evening, Becky goes down to the pumping station with her own tin bucket. She draws the cool water, takes off her laced black shoes and sits on the river bank, soaking her feet. The river itself is very quiet, but the insects hum noisily. Snatches of talk carry from the house and the huts, and, from a mile or so down river, there is often an undertone of clapsticks beating out the starlit hours.

Just where the river bend turns out of sight, Becky sees their nearer fires like stars amongst the trees. Some nights, she makes out figures moving towards the fires along the bank and hears oaths muttered as the would-be visitor tripped on the uneven ground. Some of the workers camped down near the Aborigines' camp: some just visited in the dark. This night, she sees the dull glow of a firestick making its way down and over the gullies separating the homestead paddock and the camp, heading along the bank towards her. Her own small lamp is as much a star on the dark riverbank as the campfires. She quickly tips out her bucket and put on her shoes, and waits to see who it might be.

Adelaide, 2002

Frank Warwick is elderly now, but he remembers ‘Becky.’ With the tape recorder running on the table between our comfortable lounge chairs, I asked him:

‘So could you tell me again the story about Rebecca Castledine and Jack Witchetty?’

Well ... she was a very refined girl, Mum said. She was a well-brought up girl and she came from quite a good relationship in England. She said she was well connected in England, but she came out here. I don’t remember Mum ever saying anything or noticing anything, but at the end of her year, she drew her wages and went on her holidays, and Old Jacky drew his wages and went on his holidays. They both left on the mail coach to go into Louth, I think it was. Anyhow when they were in Louth, they paid the policeman a pound to be their best man. And they were married in Bourke—in Louth?—and as far as I know and that was it.⁵⁰

And that was it. No mention of Becky and Jack going on a bender in Bourke and marrying the next day on the spur of the moment, as he had said to me when I first asked him that question on the phone. Stories are fickle things.

Winbar Station, 1914

Becky has her end of year salary in her purse, and best wishes for her holidays ringing in her ears. If she feels tearful, it isn’t apparent through the dark veil she tucks about her face, and the darker moving veil of flies that dance about any stationary and living thing. Her trunks are packed and waiting for the mail coach under the shade tree at the gate. Jack Forbes has also drawn his wages, taken leave, and stands waiting in the same pool of shade.

‘*Windurah knimba bury?*’⁵¹ (‘Where are you going?’ he? she? asks.)

‘*Burrey lay mutpa, Mattels*’⁵² (‘Come with me, sweetheart,’ she? he? replies.)

Together on the mail truck, they lurch hot and damp into Louth. Over the next several days, they continue the journey into Bourke with the mail, and stop there while the letters went on, perhaps including one to Becky’s sisters. She doesn’t expect a reply, and gives no forwarding address.

Druid Vale Station, 2001

The A4 envelope from Her Majesty's Registrar of Marriages, NSW arrived in my postbox at the Hawker Post Office, and I opened it right there. Rebecca and Jack's Marriage certificate!

MARRIAGE REGISTERED IN NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA.

CERTIFIED COPY FURNISHED UNDER PART 8 OF THE REGISTRATION OF BIRTHS, DEATHS AND MARRIAGES ACT, 1995.

| No. | Date and place of marriage | Name and surname of parties | Usual occupation | Usual place of residence | Civil status | Birthplace | Age | Father's name, mother's name and maiden surname | Father's occupation |
|------|--|-----------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|--------------|--------------|-----|---|---------------------|
| 3728 | 17 th January 1914 Bourke Courthouse | Jack Forbes Rebecca Castelline | Labourer Cook | Bourke NSW Bourke NSW | Widower | Adelaide NSW | 52 | Forbes Mary (unknown) | Labourer |
| | | | | | Spinster | Bow England | 38 | George Castelline Mary Richmond | Seaman |

MARRIED at the Registrar's Office, Bourke

The Consent of _____ of the Bridegroom, was given in writing to the Registrar

The Consent of _____ of the Bride, was given in writing to the Registrar

According to the provisions of the Marriage Act 1908

The Marriage was solemnized between us
Jack X Forbes
Rebecca Castelline

By me, W. Forsythe, Registrar

In the presence of
A. G. Ireland
John H. Walshe

Received and Registered by me this 23rd day of January 1999
W. Forsythe, District Registrar

I, TREVOR STACEY HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE ABOVE IS A TRUE COPY OF PARTICULARS RECORDED IN A REGISTER KEPT BY ME.

ISSUED AT SYDNEY 23RD JULY, 1999

REGISTRAR

They were married 17 January 1914 at the Bourke Courthouse by William Forsythe, Registrar. The fifty-two year old Jack, 'a widower', signed his name with a cross while the registrar wrote out the name Jack took: 'Jack Forbes', after a father noted as ' - ' Forbes, described as a labourer.⁵³ Jack's mother appeared only as 'Mary (unknown)': 'Witchetty' found no place in Her Majesty's lexicon.

Witnesses were the long serving Sub-Inspector Walshe of the Bourke police and First Class Constable Ireland.⁵⁴ One of these must have acted as Sub-protector of Aborigines, and

given permission for Jack to marry; otherwise the 'Aborigines Protection' law of Section 10 of NSW Act 25 would have prohibited Becky 'Wandering with Aborigines':

Whosoever, not being an aborigine, or the child of an aborigine, lodges or wanders in company with any aborigine, and does not, on being required by a justice, give to his satisfaction a good account that he has a lawful fixed place of residence in New South Wales and lawful means of support, and that he so lodged or wandered for some temporary and lawful occasion only, and did not continue to do so beyond such occasion, shall be guilty of an offence against this Act.⁵⁵

It's hard to know if the law envisaged the possibility that the said 'wanderer' might be a non-Aboriginal woman. Both Rebecca and Jack give 'Bourke' as their place of residence, and do not return to Winbar.

Bourke, 1914

As storms gather above the dusty streets of Bourke, Jack and Becky cross the river by the northern bridge, and Jack takes Becky to the camp at North Bourke, on the western banks of the Paaka. See Becky riding on her seatrunk on the back of the cart, and Jack walking at the horse's head. She wears that wide, warm smile of hers, as a new bride should.

Adelaide, 2002

I asked Frank how the marriage was viewed at Winbar Station. Frank's tone was serious:

No, it wasn't the accepted thing by a long way, oh no... She could never understand why she wasn't connected and recognized in the Australian community, because she couldn't see anything wrong with her marrying an Aborigine ... But they didn't come back to the station ... Well, Mum always spoke well of her. She said, 'She's a very good girl.' But Becky never would accept the fact that her children weren't as good as anybody else's. That got under her skin.⁵⁶

Flinders Ranges, 2001 – 2002

Daisy tells her family, the story of their great and great great grandparents.

I tell them. I talk about her sometimes, [to] my kids. I tell my nieces ... how she's come from England, a white woman ... And I think everyone else is proud of her too, that she came out and married an Aboriginal man...⁵⁷

...That's what she was supposed to come out for: to meet up with an Aboriginal man.⁵⁸

'Oh yes, she married an Aboriginal man, which fitted in right, you know.' ... 'and she stayed there...She was dedicated to him,' I'm told, over and over by Adnyamathanha *yuras* throughout the Flinders Ranges. The story is always the same: 'She came all the way from England to marry Jack Forbes'.⁵⁹

Nepabunna, 1950s

Sitting around the corner of the wooden table inside her tin hut, old Mrs. Forbes pours tea into white enamel cups for young Mrs. Woods, the station cook at Wertaloon. They are in animated conversation, the older woman enjoying the wit and warmth of the younger woman, matching it with her lively opinions.

'Oh, here comes the pommy blood out!' teases the visitor.

The bright eyes narrow in the wrinkled face. 'I'm not a Pom!'⁶⁰ Mrs Forbes' pale face is set, and she sits up straight against the inclination of her bush bowyang chair. It's an argument she's had before, and her reply has already been put into print in 1940, in Mrs Hill's travel book:

'If, as they say, a wife takes her husband's nationality, I am an Australian, actually the only real white Australian there is.'⁶¹

On her way home, Mrs. Woods tells her husband about it.

'Teach you to watch what you say!' he replies, grinning at his young wife.

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Life Writing Chapter Six

Into the Corner

Hawker, 2001

‘That white woman cut me out’, growled an elderly Barkindji woman, remembering back over fifty years how she failed to snare Jack Forbes, and feeling the hurt again, with vitriol.⁶² I laughed and laughed when I first heard about this on the phone, and was careful to show respect when I met her descendants some time later. Twenty years after the event, Becky is said to have given her own account to journalist Ernestine Hill, full of curious and indelicate questions, but in awe of Becky all the same:

‘He asked me to be his wife...He had knocked about with white men since he was seven or eight years old, and knew the lingo all right...

‘We were married at Bourke just eighteen years ago, by the local magistrate, with two policemen as witnesses, and then by the fire-stick ceremony of the New South Wales tribes at night. You know the blackfella wedding? A burning fire-stick is placed between you, and an uncle or god-father – generally an old man of the tribe – comes along and tells you that you must cook meat for yourselves now, that the man must not give his woman too many hidings, and that if you have a quarrel or argument you must keep it in your own camp, and not bring other people into the fight ...

‘At first I was worried lest the blacks should object to a white woman in camp, but the policeman promised that if there was any trouble, he would make them see reason. But they were quite pleased about it. They held a big kooloomookoo in our honour, an all night corroboree that lasted till daylight.⁶³

The account is told with some relish, and I wonder how it felt at the time, in the flies and the dust and the strangeness of it all.

North Bourke camp, 1914

Constable Ireland is a smudge of dust on his way back into Bourke, and a smouldering stick, as thick as your arm, lies between Jack and Becky on the ground. Becky’s things are lying

anyhow in the dust, with Jack's swag. Five or six dogs, nearly tall as her waist and even thinner, are sniffing them. Jack's spears are beside him where he sits, on the ground.

Becky doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. She can see a group of women, watching her, and she wonders if they are cousins of that Dunlop girl. Woman, actually, dressed in her starched white house dress over her bare feet, waiting at Winbar when she should have been over the river on duty at Dunlop. She had been shouting at Jack as he walked across the house paddock that last morning, a young child holding onto her skirts. Becky only caught a handful of words – '*Knun inah knimba coulpra toulaga? Woorah Bury, Woorah Bury!*' – and Jack's reply, muttered over his shoulder, '*Combiah Yelka.*'⁶⁴ Becky doesn't expect these women to be kind to her, only she hopes the Constable's warning stops them from being cruel. Friends had never bothered her much.

The old man who placed the firestick at their camp was making his way back towards them, singing under his breath. He had told them: 'Own meat, you, him. No bang, bang her. No trouble.' Now he sings out to Jack: 'Uncle make house with you!' In a stride, this old man, thin and bent like a twig of black wattle, is hoisting Jack to his feet and the two of them go off gathering long boughs, pieces of corrugated iron, twists of wire, and grey blankets with the words 'NSW Aboriginal' marked across them in large letters. *This is my first home*, Becky thinks, watching the men build the patchwork humpy amongst the sandhills, a river and a world away from the town beyond the trees.

The corroboree goes all night for them, clapsticks ringing above the singing and the dust of the dancers, while the stars wheel slowly and the air turns chill then still with the first light. Jack is a good dancer, mimicking an Afghan slaughtering their sheep, so that everyone laughs

and Becky feels so proud.⁶⁵ She sees Jack cast her glowing smiles, often, and the women sitting near her pat her and laugh.

By dawn, the circle breaks up and people wander away. Their hut is made, and Becky gratefully follows Jack into it. She is not young and neither is he, but he runs his finger gently under her chin. They sit together on the stamped down ground inside the hut. He has to stoop to kiss her lips, and she feels his moustache tickle against her skin. She puts her hand up to his shoulder and picks at the paint there. It is powder under her touch, soft and flaking and she rubs her finger tips together to feel it smooth her skin. He begins to undo the buttons of her blouse, and she lets him. He runs his hands over her body, and she feels her skin come alive. She holds her breath. It is more awkward to take off her skirt, so she kneels while he fiddles with the hooks, and then slides it slowly over her slim hips. She feels his whiskers brush against her back, and then his kisses, over and over until she turns and holds his head in her hands, nuzzling into his thick black hair. They hold each other like that, both naked, behind the iron and dark woollen walls of their hut, pricked by bright daylight at the joins. Then his arms are around her, and he picks her up with no effort at all, and lays her down on the canvas and blankets of his swag. He comes to her as rapid and intense as the dancing had been, each touch shuddering the earth and she is lost and breathless and finally home.

Then Jack is up, pulling on his trousers. He smiles at her frown. 'You hungry? I'll get you some breakfast. Wait here.'

When next she wakes up, the blanket at the hut entrance is pulled aside and white daylight frames Jack's black back. He bends over a small cooking fire at the doorway of their hut, a damper cooking in the coals and a roasted lizard steaming on a rock beside it. Becky buttons her skirt and blouse, laces up her boots and joins him in the late morning light.

'I'll get some water,' she says, and swings off in the direction of the one tap on the pipeline, clasping the wire handle of the cut down kerosene tin. She still wears that wide grin.

Mitchell Library, Sydney, 2003

The beautiful expansive dome of the Mitchell Library is matched by the spaciousness of its research tables below. I spread out all the copies of the New South Wales Parliamentary Acts relating to 'Aborigines' that I could find, to understand the maze of legislation Becky would have suddenly found herself in the midst of. For instance, in 1915, an Amendment to the Aborigines Protection Act (NSW) had been passed, giving the Board and its authorised officers the power to take custody of children of any age from 'aborigines', wherever they 'were satisfied that such a course is in the interest of the moral or physical welfare of such child.'⁶⁶ Of the nearly seventy definitions of 'aborigine' employed across the country by white administrations,⁶⁷ in this time and place it meant: 'any full-blooded aboriginal native...and any person apparently having an admixture of aboriginal blood' who received rations or any kind of aid from the Aborigines Protection Board, or lived on a reserve.⁶⁸ Hoping to start a family, Becky and Jack, like many others, may have decided to move from NSW and the gaze of the *gubbas* and their Law.

Green Gully, 1915

Jack has taken Becky to his home country, and they join a camp south of Adelaide Gate at Green Gully where the reds of the flat earth meet the gray silt of the gutters that become the Warrego and Parroo when the rains come. Under the soft green of the coolibahs, Becky spends her days with aunties and their children, while Jack takes work with traveling stock

more often than not. There is a white man at the tin hut by the ground tank that made this a public watering place on the droving run. Becky is careful never to collect her water on her own: she can see what he thinks of her as he stands under his hooded verandah, watching the women come to and fro. One time he had called out to her,

‘Hey, what’s your name then?’

‘Mrs Forbes’, she’d replied, but quietly so she doesn’t know if he heard. She doesn’t look at him, but her companion tells the tale back at camp how the man had snorted like a bullock and snot came out of his nose! There is a lot of laughing amongst the women, sitting easily on the dirt, rolling soaked grasses against their exposed thighs, twisting, twisting into string. Becky sits in her long gingham skirt and boots and knots the string into nets to catch *kulbuarra*, a long-legged bird, like they had shown her.

‘You gotta catchem babies,’ they chide, kindly, ‘Just fatten ‘em up on them birds and they’ll find you, alright!’ Laughter peels around the group, and soon Becky is smiling too. But she is worried, and so is Jack. She is nearly forty years old.

‘Talk to them aunties,’ was all he said, but he rested his warm hand on her shoulder.

They take her to women’s places: she watches babies being born and hears the songs, fetches the dogwood branches, sees how the midwives straighten crooked limbs and slap life into still babies. Still for her: nothing. The other women pity her but talk about her, too. Was Jack being punished for something? Was she?

Jack is sitting quiet by the fire, while Becky is cooking a stew the way he likes it. He picks up a stick to light his clay pipe and puts it in the fire.

‘I think we should go,’ he says in a voice soft as dust.

Although she does not look at him, she knows he is looking straight at her. ‘Where?’

'My old auntie, she says go to the old lady, old white lady, that way,' and he jerks his head south-west.

The White Lady. She'd heard the story, of course: they thought it was a great joke in the camp, telling her about *Guba Walga*, the 'white lady.' *Guba Walga* was the spiritual mother of the Wangkumara people and had lived around Coopers Creek in South Australia, healing the sick people that were brought to her. A man called her to heal his sick child, and then wouldn't let her return to her people. So she waited there until a dust storm hid her escape, but the man threw his boomerang after her, and it cut off her head. Her body turned to stone, and her head to gold, and was hidden. Women would go to the stone column and ask for healing for their sick children.⁶⁹ That was why they wanted Becky to go to *Guba Walga*: to heal the sick baby spirits that would not be born.

'Far?' asks Becky, watching Jack's face for signs of anger.

'Little bit. I know people that way, old Uncle Fred Johnson, cousin to my mother. We'll go that way. More west, eh?' and he grins at her.

'More west,' She says and smiles as she stands up, suddenly all business. The wanderlust is on her, and all of a sudden she's ready to sail off into the unknown again. 'What do we take?'

Monarto, 2004

My desk was strewn with maps and notes of expeditions that could never have succeeded.

The White Lady forever lives just past Mt Poole, which was named for the man who died in the six months of hellish heat in 1845 that kept Stuart's Expeditionary party holed up at the nearby waterhole, where the lead in their pencils melted, the thermometer exploded, and their

hair stopped growing.⁷⁰ From there, Sturt tried, and failed, to find whether a desert or a sea lay at the heart of the continent. Three years later, only two hundred miles to the north near Nockatunga station, Leichhardt and his party disappeared after the same quest, or almost. The rumoured survivor, Classen, may have known the answer in the end, had he ever been found to tell his tale.⁷¹ Someone who *was* found, over a decade later and just over the South Australian border, was the lone survivor of the Burke and Wills expedition. John King, pleased to talk and required to do so in the ensuing inquiry, told Charles Howitt where Wills had been buried at Tilcha waterhole, how Burke had met his fate along the Coopers Creek, and that the Yantruwanta people had saved his own life.⁷² The country in the furthest corners of three states was where Jack took Becky to meet *Guba Walga*.

Corner Country, 1917

Jack leads Becky through the country, singing as he goes, fixing a stone in a *mura* track here, clearing a soak there, singing out to the spirits, telling them who is coming so they will welcome Becky, too. Becky is trying to recognise something, anything, as she travels. The horizon wearies her. She watches the ground instead, trying out words in her head. ‘*Sand*’—but it was too solid for that. ‘*Rock*’—but it came away when you scraped at it, in powder. ‘*Dust then,*’—no, nothing silky or fairylike in the way it lay on the surface; nor ‘*gravelly*’, as it wasn’t sharp. *Just dirt* ... but it wasn’t black: it was more like the colour of the back of her hand, where tiny lines criss-crossed the skin’s surface, like the cracks appearing here and there on this ... *this, well, ground, then.*

Rebecca gives up looking for words for it and just walks on it instead, feeling its firmness answering her footfalls, holding her up and, glancing behind, seeing that it bears only a faint trace of her passing.

Tibooburra, 2004

The country must have been drying up under their feet. In museums, libraries and around dining tables in the Corner country, I learned about the drought of 1920. Sidney Kidman's empire is blowing away as dust, even as he is forced to sell the dog fence wire to offset loss of stock. And after all, he ran cattle, not sheep, like his less-than-impressed neighbours. He wrote:

'The stations north of a line extending east from Broken Hill to Wilcannia are in a state that history has never known before. Neither black men nor white men can remember a drought with such awful effects.'⁷³

Kidman was a fair boss, appreciating and understanding his indigenous workers, and it is likely that Jack would have had work on these huge holdings.⁷⁴

The Corner, 1915

Jack is not lost working his way across Kidman's present and future holdings; this is his country. One morning, the not-yet-hot morning sun picks out a silhouette against powder blue sky: a gleaming white quartz pillar with curves to its waist and stained red here and there with the earth. *Guba Walga*.

They don't climb to her, not yet, but instead pick between the folds of her flanks to find the small waterhole. Jack is grinning and dripping water from his moustache as he splashes the cool water on his face and arms.

'Nice this place?'

'Yes. What is it?'

‘The old cleverman, the pelican, he came here to fill up his beak. Then he had to fly away, his people told him, “You’re too clever, you have to fly away.” So he went that way,’ Jack’s jaw jutted towards the north. ‘But they speared him that way. So then he went that-a-way,’ and his head tips to the north-west. He enjoys the story. ‘And what do you reckon? Where his blood dripped down: gold! And where he spilt some water from his beak? Big creek and opal. But he couldn’t get all the way. He got too tired. He come down on a hill near the big creek, and that’s where he died, way up there.’⁷⁵ Jack’s eyes stare into distant space, and he sings then, in a rumbling way, crouching by the waters edge. Becky listens to the unfamiliar words, imagining a bird she had only seen in pictures.

When Jack finishes, he turned to her. ‘He buried up there, long way. But this was his water, from *Guba Walga*. Come on.’ He splashes a handful of water at Becky, and it shatters into tiny drops that hang shining in the morning light and then spatter the cotton of her shirt with dark drops. He laughs at her now, this fifty-something man, with all the confidence of his years, and all the infectious style that still attracts her to him.

‘It’s all right,’ he sings out, to no one in particular, his words sinking in the water and rebounding off the rocks. ‘This white lady, she’s with me. She’s come to see *Guba Walga*.’ He gestures for Becky to come.

‘Tomorrow,’ he says, ‘you go up and see *Guba Walga*, call her *Nganja*.⁷⁶ You tell her what you want. Must be you one like her, eh? She help you.’ He says it kindly, and Becky believes him. ‘Don’t you go running off, though,’ he says, as a quick afterthought.

‘Why would I want to?’ replies Becky, smartly ‘You’re my people now.’

Becky and Jack spent nine years in the Corner, during the period of the worst drought Kidman ever weathered. While white fellas perished and stations went bust, *Guba Walga* brought Becky and Jack two healthy sons.

When Jack and Becky's first son was born, they named him for his father and for the place he was born: John Tilcha Forbes.⁷⁷ When the second one came, they were at the main camp at Yandama, and named him Raymond Yandama Forbes. Those two boys are almost the only clues I could find for those nine years. Apart from Granny Gertie, who seems to know something about every question I ask.

'How would she have those babies, Granny?' I ask. There is no hesitation.

'He said: "You're not going to hospital, because you've got to give the baby here, the same as the aboriginal way."'⁷⁸ She wets her lips, quietly, and sits back in chair, looking out of her new windows to the blue hills to the east.

Yandama Station, 1924

As work and seasons shift, the Forbes family move back on the New South Wales side at the Yandama homestead camp, by the grey channels of the creek where ceremony is danced on the flat islands between the creek beds, and water is found along its generous banks. The days begin with the crisp clang of the 'cow bell' at the homestead, and end when the sun melts into the vast stony plain.⁷⁹

Becky is watching her two chubby sons launch themselves with shrieks of laughter at their father, who is sitting trying to heat gum over the fire. One is hanging on his back and the other he now tickles in his lap. Becky has been away from their camp all morning, helping at another birth down the creek. The old women asked her to come, marvelling that she had her

sons at her age. They liked to have the white lady there for luck, and she loved the miracle of birth every time. Jack, seeing her straighten up, pretends to growl at the giggling boys. His face is gentle.

‘They got to look after me, now I’m old,’ says Jack, and feigns a sore back. The boys hurl themselves at him again, shrieking. Truth was though, it is the best part of a decade since they had married, and Jack has passed sixty. He is still a hard worker, but not so flamboyant in the yards, preferring quieter work than the colts. It is true too, that there was less work around; in the wake of the war, then the drought, there is a steadily increasing stream of white men tramping the station tracks, picking up a day’s work here, a month’s there, for a bit of tucker and a place to camp, nevermind the work would be better done by any one of a number of men in camp. It was making everyone in the camp, including Becky, uneasy.

Tibooburra, 2004

The Bush Telegraph is a wonderful thing. Sharing cold cuts and salad in an old home in Tibooburra, I heard how ‘it was common knowledge that a Mrs Witchetty ... went off living with the blacks and eating what they ate.’⁸⁰ Bill, part of that country in one way and another most of his life, didn’t know anything about a Mrs Forbes, or a Jack Forbes for that matter, but he knew about Mrs Witchetty. In fact he’d named a horse he’d broken in once, ‘Mrs Witchetty.’

‘Why was that?’ I asked.

‘She was a bit of a wild old brumby mare,’ he said, with a chuckle.

His wife, more to the point, added, ‘Maybe she was a bit loopy and living all that time in the blacks camps well you would be loopy.’

They might never have seen her, but they knew what they’d heard.

Yandama Station camp, 1925

People are coming to Yandama: from all over the Corner, from the river, travelling in from Queensland, even making their way from the hilly country to the west along the Yandama creek.⁸¹ Jack welcomes Uncle Fred Johnson, his wife Rachel and their tribe of children, and the young Wiltons, Ted and Eva, to come camp by them, and nighttimes are lively with their talk.⁸² They call themselves ‘Adnyamathanha’ – ‘Hill people’ – and bring news of the big camp at Mt Serle. They complain indignantly about the new manager trying to make people work for rations – ‘It’s our place they on, *inni!*’ – instead of giving them free, and besides they were only paying the working men ten shillings a week.⁸³ Becky glances at Jack, asking a question: regular wages? Rachel goes on, describing the good money her children could get for rabbit skins, and laughing about the antics of Fred’s long strings of donkeys pulling their cart, and anyone else’ who would pay. Jack listens quietly.

‘There’s work for your children too?’ Becky asks, and Jack translates for her out of habit, although Fred brushes it aside.

‘Too right! Plenty for them to do. And later, go through *vadnapa*, *wilyaru*, get sheep work when they want it, come back to the ration depot other times.’

‘They can’t take our kids off us,’ adds Rachel. ‘Them *udnyus* set up a school but we said they bring that school to us, and our kids can go. They not taking them anywhere without us.’⁸⁴ Becky looks at her own small boys, throwing stones at a stick not far off. Raymond is dark, but he has her sharp features. John is fair. She glances across to Jack, who is thoughtfully tracing lines in the sand with his finger. They would talk later.

In the days that follow, there is little time for news, as preparations for ceremony begin in earnest. Becky is swept along with the other women, who talk to her and show her things, and although the complex instructions are sometimes too much for her, she learns what she can. There are so many languages flowing around her now, that she only tries to read what she sees: aunties pinching her children's cheeks, and trying their scant English to tell her 'Good one there'; and the way to wipe lines of pipe clay onto the older childrens' bodies for the dances that poked fun at station life, or inept attempts at hunting, and had the whole camp in stitches. But they shoo her away from Jack as he sits still while others, fingers daubed with white pipe clay, trace lines on his chest and arms.

Finally the ceremony becomes men's business, *dulbiri mura*,⁸⁵ and Becky does not see Jack at all. Instead, she helps with the food gathering and cooking, ready for the feast at the end of ceremony time. Becky pounds the seeds, trickling grain from one hand onto the flat grinding stone and tap! tap! smashes them with a small rock in the other. Then she gathers up the beaten grains where they fall on the blanket and, laying little piles carefully on the flat dark surface of the stone, grinds them fine with the stone rollers someone had brought into camp. 'Like a rolling pin,' she thinks, as the grain turns nearly to flour. Like the other women, she mixes in ration flour, to make it go further: the cattle had not left enough of the *ngarru*⁸⁶ growing along the creek to feed them all. They like to add a little sugar too these days, and she gives her boys some sweetened mixture to keep them quiet. She hums as she works; surely this will not be the last ceremony, as some are saying. She will be sorry when it is over.

Then, one day, when the visitors have all drifted away or decided to stay, and the winds blow cooler, Jack stands at the opening of the hut well after the cow bell has rung. His horse

shifts its weight in its traces and the cart behind it creaks softly. Under the soft brim of his hat, his grey moustache turns up in a smile.

'Oh, we'll go back and see my people!' he says to Becky, and the boys whoop with excitement.⁸⁷

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¹ AP Elkin, 'Series 2 Box 9', Field Notes, Personal archives of AP Elkin, Sydney.

² Gertie Johnson, *Transcript of Interview 17701*, ed. Tracy Spencer (Nepabunna: 2001), vol.

³ Sarah Martin, 'Aboriginal History of Olive Downs, Sturt National Park, near Tibooburra Nsw: An Overview for the Olive Downs Conservation Management Plan.' P12

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- ⁴ Janet Matthews, *The Opal That Turned into Fire: And Other Stories from the Wangkumara*, ed. Isobel White (Broome, WA: Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation, 1994). P126,7
- ⁵ Jeremy Beckett, 'George Dutton's Country: Portrait of an Aboriginal Drover,' *Aboriginal History* 2 (1978). P8
- ⁶ Bobbie Hardy, *Lament for the Barkindji: The Vanished Tribes of the Darling River Region* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1976).
- ⁷ Martin, 'Aboriginal History of Olive Downs, Sturt National Park, near Tibooburra Nsw: An Overview for the Olive Downs Conservation Management Plan.' p17
- ⁸ Beckett, 'George Dutton's Country: Portrait of an Aboriginal Drover.' *Wiljaru* denotes initiated man in several groups within the area described as George Dutton's country.
- ⁹ Beckett, 'George Dutton's Country: Portrait of an Aboriginal Drover.' p18
- ¹⁰ Beckett, 'George Dutton's Country: Portrait of an Aboriginal Drover.' p3, p16
- ¹¹ Margaret Somerville, *Body/Landscape Journals* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1999). P25 explores this metaphor of hybrid identities.
- ¹² Martin, 'Aboriginal History of Olive Downs, Sturt National Park, near Tibooburra Nsw: An Overview for the Olive Downs Conservation Management Plan.' P7
- ¹³ Brad Steadman, *Conversation*, (Brewarrina: 2004), vol.
- ¹⁴ John Gerritsen, *Tibooburra: Corner Country* (Tibooburra: Tibooburra Press, 1980). P60
- ¹⁵ Marriage Certificate 3728 Jack Forbes and Rebecca Castledine
- ¹⁶ Matthews, *The Opal That Turned into Fire: And Other Stories from the Wangkumara*. P90
- ¹⁷ Sally Morris Ngaka Ebsworth, Liz Croll, and Annie Ross, *Recipes for Survival*, (Tibooburra: NSW National Parks and Wildlife, c.2004), vol.
- ¹⁸ Martin, 'Aboriginal History of Olive Downs, Sturt National Park, near Tibooburra Nsw: An Overview for the Olive Downs Conservation Management Plan.'p22,24
- ¹⁹ Martin, 'Aboriginal History of Olive Downs, Sturt National Park, near Tibooburra Nsw: An Overview for the Olive Downs Conservation Management Plan.' p25 Accounts from Sturt's expedition to Depot Glen in 1845 suggest knowledge and artefacts of Europeans had preceded actual contact. Information from Parks and Wildlife Display, Tibooburra, 2004
- ²⁰ South Australian Department of Education, *The Adnyamathanha People: Aboriginal People of the Flinders Ranges. An Aboriginal Studies Course for Secondary Students.*, Aboriginal Studies 8-12 (Education Department of South Australia, 1992). P128, 130-2 This section includes accounts of first contact between Adnyamathanha people of the Northern Flinders Ranges with EJ Eyre's expedition in 1840, both from Eyre's journal, as well as an account by W Rogers appearing in *The Register* 1924 and purporting to be an Adnyamathanha recollection of the encounter.

²¹ Education, *The Adnyamathanha People: Aboriginal People of the Flinders Ranges. An Aboriginal Studies Course for Secondary Students*. p139 quoting Bull's account of the camp on Angepena station, October 1856

²² Education, *The Adnyamathanha People: Aboriginal People of the Flinders Ranges. An Aboriginal Studies Course for Secondary Students*. P144 'The Flinders Ranges were struck by drought from 1864 to 1866.';

Christine Davis, and McKenzie, Pearl, *Adnyamathanha Genealogy* (Government Printer South Australia: Aboriginal Heritage Branch. South Australian Department of Environment and Planning., 1985). P1a describes the family of Frome Charlie and his sister Polly, and the deaths of their parents. Polly was the second wife of Mt Serle Bob. While the relationship between Jack's mother, and Mt Serle Bob's wife Polly, is conjecture, the genealogy also claims that Polly's mother was sister to the mother of another Adnyamathanha elder, Fred Johnson.

Martin, 'Aboriginal History of Olive Downs, Sturt National Park, near Tibooburra Nsw: An Overview for the Olive Downs Conservation Management Plan.' P45 Drawing on Hercus and Goodall, adds that Fred Johnson 'also spent time at Yandama and Tibooburra', and that his oldest son, Donald was born at Yandama and continued to live in western NSW with his family. This suggests more than a passing association between Fred Johnson and the corner country. In addition, on p35 the 1891 Census for Milparinka lists a 'Tilcha Polly' as a householder of an Aboriginal household at Yandama. It is not inconceivable that these two Polly's are the same person, if Polly had moved to work on Yandama with her three young children to the Scotsman, McKenzie, as mentioned in the *Adnyamathanha Genealogy*, p1a

Gertie Johnson, *Conversation with Gertie Johnson 010802*, ed. Tracy Spencer (Nepabunna: 2002), vol. Gertie claims that 'Jack Forbes was Billidapa, from Moolawatana way. My grandfather (showed me photo Clivey had got for her, but book not identified) – one called Mount Serle Bob – had his mother as a wife after his father died. Mt Serle Bob's third wife – first one died, then my grandmother, then her, all living around the fire and he looked after them all.' The narrative suggests that Jack's mother, as a third wife, may be in a sister relationship with Polly, Bob's second wife, explaining her presence in Gertie's recollections, but also her absence from the *Adnyamathanha Genealogy*.

²³ Matthews, *The Opal That Turned into Fire: And Other Stories from the Wangkumara*. P119

²⁴ Hardy, *Lament for the Barkindji: The Vanished Tribes of the Darling River Region*. P121 refers to missionary Shaw's 1867 account which describes white men shooting nine Aborigines in retaliation for cattle stealing as a not unusual occurrence.

²⁵ Matthews, *The Opal That Turned into Fire: And Other Stories from the Wangkumara*. P90 Beckett, 'George Dutton's Country: Portrait of an Aboriginal Drover.' P9 Beckett calls the circumcision rite practised by George Dutton's people from the Corner 'a form of the *wiljaru* rite...like the people's of south-western Queensland and north-eastern South Australia', after Elkin 1931.

²⁶ Maree Barnes and Geoff Wise, *100 Years: Celebrating 100 Years of Natural Resource Progress in the Western Division of Nsw: Learning from the Past and Planning for the Future*. (NSW Department of Sustainable Natural Resources and WEST 2000 Plus., 2002). P51

²⁷ Luise Hercus and Grace Koch, "a Native Died Sudden at Lake Allallina." *Aboriginal History* 20 (1996). This article argues for a third category of song cycle composed in the semi-traditional context of contact, where contemporary events are represented in verses in traditional forms.; E Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness: A Classic Journey around and across Australia* (Potts Point: Imprint, 1940). P274

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- ²⁸ Beckett, 'George Dutton's Country: Portrait of an Aboriginal Drover.' P18
- ²⁹ CEW Bean, *On the Wool Track* (London: Alston Rivers, Ltd., 1910). P225
- ³⁰ Johnson, *Transcript of Interview 17701*, vol.
- ³¹ Peggy Brock, *Yura and Udnyu: A History of the Adnyamathanha of the Northern Flinders Ranges* (Netley SA: Wakefield Press, 1985). P38-40
- ³² 'Grg52/1/2/1910 List of Half Castes in South Australia 1st Nov 1909', State Records of South Australia. Includes on the list For Hawker District. Living as Droving, colt breaking: Arthur Witchetty 22.
- ³³ Johnson, *Transcript of Interview 17701*, vol.
- ³⁴ Johnson, *Transcript of Interview 17701*, vol.
- ³⁵ Martin, 'Aboriginal History of Olive Downs, Sturt National Park, near Tibooburra Nsw: An Overview for the Olive Downs Conservation Management Plan.' P33
- ³⁶ The idea for this approach to country and identity is based on Beckett, 'George Dutton's Country: Portrait of an Aboriginal Drover.', which describes the life and travel of George Dutton, some twenty years younger than Jack but of similar background and region, and Jeremy Beckett, ed., *Wherever I Go: Myles Lalor's 'Oral History'* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2000).
- ³⁷ Darling River
- ³⁸ Bernhard Schebeck, 'An Adnyamathanha - English "Research Dictionary" Version 0.02'.
- ³⁹ Frank Warwick, *Converation with Frank Warwick 030602*, ed. Tracy Spencer (Adelaide: 2002), vol.
- ⁴⁰ Daisy Shannon, *Transcript of Interview 1*, ed. Tracy Spencer (Quorn SA: 2001), vol.
- ⁴¹ Interview with Mary Woods 140303
- ⁴² Interview with Mary Woods 140303
- ⁴³ Brian Elliott, *The Landscape of Australian Poetry* (Melbourne: FW Cheshire pub, 1967). This song of Moses goes on to recite Yahweh's care and guidance of Jacob in the wilderness.
- ⁴⁴ Simpson Newland, *Paving the Way: A Romance of the Australian Bush* (Adelaide: Rigby Ltd, 1893), Simpson Newland, *Blood Tracks of the Bush*, Bells Indian and Colonial Library (London and Bombay: George Bell and Sons, 1900).
- ⁴⁵ Outback Now, 'About Louth,' www.outbacknow.com.au (2006).
- ⁴⁶ From a photograph and plan of the homestead, used with permission from Frank Warwick 2003
- ⁴⁷ "...[Becky] was probably living in the house. Yes she was probably part and parcel of the house care and that sort of thing, looking after things and keeping things up and particularly helping with the children ... Becky would probably have worked very much with Mum. Oh yes she would've worked very much with her in the

house, but Jacky wouldn't have. He wouldn't have very often come up near the house." Frank Warwick, *Transcript of Interview with Frank Warwick 240602*, ed. Tracy Spencer (Adelaide: 2002), vol.

⁴⁸ Sarah Martin pers comm 2002

⁴⁹ From the word list 'Native Words and their Meanings: Notes by Edith Warwick (FRW's Mother) at Winbar Station on the River Darling at Louth NSW about 1910. Used with permission from FR Warwick 2002

⁵⁰ Warwick, *Transcript of Interview with Frank Warwick 240602*, vol.

⁵¹ trans. Where are you going? From the word list 'Native Words and their Meanings: Notes by Edith Warwick (FRW's Mother) at Winbar Station on the River Darling at Louth NSW about 1910. Used with permission from FR Warwick 2002

⁵² trans. Come with me, sweetheart From the word list 'Native Words and their Meanings: Notes by Edith Warwick (FRW's Mother) at Winbar Station on the River Darling at Louth NSW about 1910. Used with permission from FR Warwick 2002

⁵³ Where the name came from is unclear: in 1865 in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia there was a Mrs. Forbes, 'a native' arrested, along with Parallana Jacky, on suspicion of murdering a white shepherd. She was charged with the lesser offence of sheep stealing from Mt Freeling station, although they were both discharged. *Grg57/16 Vol. 1 P330 19 December 1865*, (Adelaide: South Australian State Archives), vol.

⁵⁴ The History of Bourke Vol. XIII p132; Vol. X p78; Vol. VIII p27

⁵⁵ The *Aborigines Protection Act No.25, 1909 (NSW Government) section 10*

⁵⁶ Warwick, *Transcript of Interview with Frank Warwick 240602*, vol.

⁵⁷ Shannon, *Transcript of Interview 1*, vol.

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⁵⁹ Interview with Ken McKenzie 150801; Leo and Shirley Coulthard 290702; Margaret Brown 300702; DETE interview with Colin and Roma Wilton 1985

⁶⁰ Interview with Mary Woods 140303

⁶¹ Hill, E *The Great Australian Loneliness: a classic journey around and across Australia* Imprint NSW 1940 p275

⁶² pers comm Luise Hercus 200801; pers comm Sarah Martin 2002

⁶³ E Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness: A Classic Journey around and across Australia* (Potts Point: Imprint, 1940). p272

⁶⁴ Frank Warwick, *Native Words and Their Meanings: Notes by Edith Warwick at Winbar Station on the River Darling at Louth Nsw About 1910.*, ed. Tracy Spencer (Adelaide: 2002), vol.

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⁶⁶ NSW Aborigines Protection Amending Act. Act No. 2, 1915 Section 2

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- ⁶⁹ Sally Ann Morris, *Legend of the White Lady Interpretive Display*, (NSW National Parks and Wildlife, Tibooburra, c. 2004), vol.
- ⁷⁰ P8 John Gerritsen, *Tibooburra: Corner Country* (Tibooburra: Tibooburra Press, 1980).
- ⁷¹ Les Perrin, *The Mystery of the Leichhardt Survivor: The Story of the Men Who Sought to Solve It*. (Sandgate Queensland: Len Johnstone Printers Pty Ltd, 1990).
- ⁷² P99, 100 Mitch Reardon, *The Australian Geographic Book of Corner Country: Where Outback Queensland, Nsw and Sa Meet* (Terrey Hills: Australian Geographic Pty Ltd, 1995).
- ⁷³ Jill Bowen, *Kidman: The Forgotten King: The True Story of the Greatest Pastoral Landholder in Modern History*. (North Ryde NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1987). P258
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- ⁷⁶ Matthews, *The Opal That Turned into Fire: And Other Stories from the Wangkumara*. p119
- ⁷⁷ Daisy Shannon, *Transcript of Interview 1*, ed. Tracy Spencer (Quorn SA: 2001), vol.; Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness: A Classic Journey around and across Australia*. P273
- ⁷⁸ Gertie Johnson, *Transcript of Interview 17701*, ed. Tracy Spencer (Nepabunna: 2001), vol.
- ⁷⁹ Thomson, *Conversation with Bill Thomson 061004*, vol.
- ⁸⁰ Thomson, *Conversation with Bill Thomson 061004*, vol.
- ⁸¹ Jeremy Beckett, 'George Dutton's Country: Portrait of an Aboriginal Drover,' *Aboriginal History* 2 (1978). P19
- ⁸² Christine Davis, and McKenzie, Pearl, *Adnyamathanha Genealogy* (Government Printer South Australia: Aboriginal Heritage Branch. South Australian Department of Environment and Planning., 1985). P175, 125
- ⁸³ South Australian Department of Education, *The Adnyamathanha People: Aboriginal People of the Flinders Ranges. An Aboriginal Studies Course for Secondary Students.*, Aboriginal Studies 8-12 (Education Department of South Australia, 1992).p167
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- ⁸⁵ Beckett, 'George Dutton's Country: Portrait of an Aboriginal Drover.'p19

⁸⁷ Cliff Coulthard, *Transcript of Interview 191001*, ed. Tracy Spencer (Iga Warta: 2001), vol.