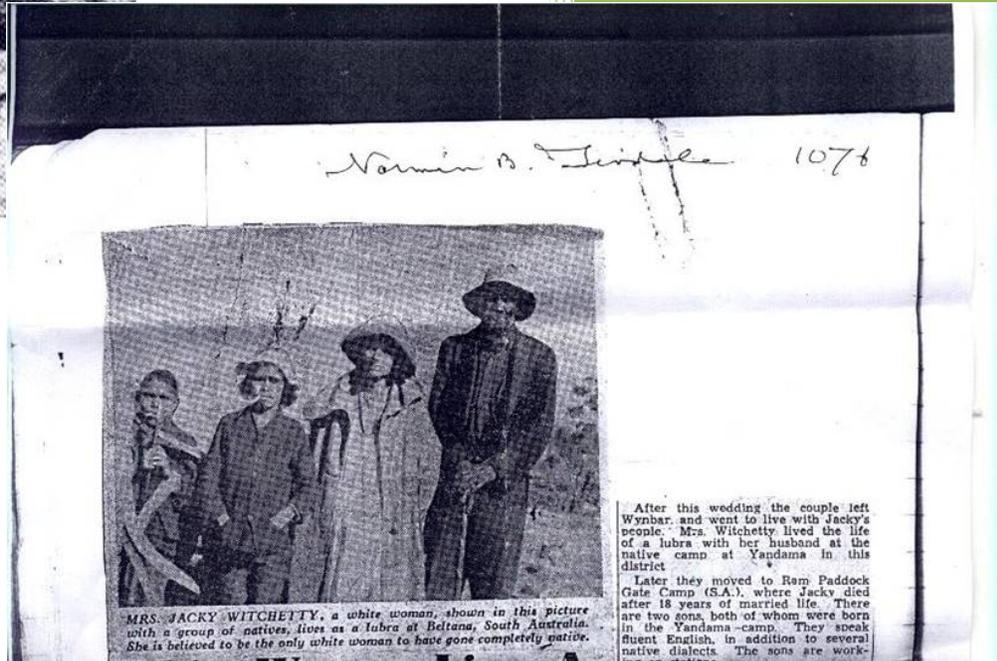




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Thesis Title:

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 Fourteen

At the boundary

Alice Springs, October 2007.

I had not written again for the best part of a year. I left Rebecca shocked and silent in her grief, and Jim thin lipped against missionary expectations while I struggled with battles of my own. My own husband, unwell for some time, decided to resign from the congregational work we shared in Alice Springs, and only a matter of weeks later, decided to leave our marriage as well. In response, I worked furiously every hour I could until my soul was so raw I had to ask for help. And then friends came to me, with bottles of wine in their hands, some unshakeable faith in me, to talk to me, ask me out, flirt with me, give me the gift of their affirmation when I had little else to hang myself on. I cut school lunches, preached sermons, made deals and extended networks, even remembered the times of my children's footy training. Some days I cried, some days I didn't. Some days I laughed. Mostly I just *kept going*. And all the while my folders of newspaper cuttings about Rebecca and archival documents in Jim's sloping hand lay open on my desk, like a comforting chorus of friends.

Nepabunna, 1930

The blackened pile of ash is still smoking, and Rebecca is so still, watching and waiting for the shapes that represent the last of her husband's belongings to disintegrate with a quiet sigh into the featureless aftermath of the fire. He is gone. It is over.

Other families are packing their things into the varied contraptions their donkey teams will pull over the rough tracks: fire pans and rough sacking mattresses, even the wire and tin that had been walls and fixtures. The missionaries Fred Eaton and Harrie Green have gone ahead

with their light loads of canvas and straight sticks to resurrect at the camp at the boundary of the land Roy Thomas has given them.

Rebecca has not moved from the camp fire. Young Gertie approaches her now, watching the older woman's reddened face, and casting about quickly for signs of her sons.

'Uncle want to talk to you.' The girl speaks to the ground, smoothing her hands over the slim white cotton of her dress. Rebecca waits.

'Mrs Forbes, he says you got to come and write a letter for him, 'cause he wants to stay here.' There is a question in that last comment, and Rebecca rolls it over in her mind. Was she going, or staying? She looks across to the settlement, dismantling and messy, every loose load fraying further in the teasing gusts of the morning breezes. Tin clanks loudly across the flat, but beyond that, by the small creek, is the fresh earth mound where her Jack's body is sinking into itself inside its firm wooden coffin.

'Hmm. Wait a minute, I get my things' and she darts back into the strangely vacant hut that Jack built for her.

Around the side of Ted and Winnie's sizeable stone hut, under the wide brush shelter that leant against the whitewashed walls of the house, Rebecca is marking out the letters to Ted's dictation in her rounded, heavy hand.¹ She licks the nib of the thick pencil frequently with a small fast movement, and wetly forms the letters.²

To the
Protector of Abo

Ram Paddock Gate
C/o Angepina Station

Dec 23. 12. 30

Will you please try and get us building proper at Ram Paddock Gate. The native well we would like you to try Mr Cole and White for two mile long and one mile wide. Mr Thomas we know gave us Hookpona ground there are four springs on that run but he gave us the dry end he cut off the four springs. The young fellows have and are still trying to get water but they cannot go on any longer with the rations they are getting just the bare flour sugar

and tea.

And oblige

Ted Coultard

Ps

Mr White is in Adelaide now you might catch him and talk the matter over why we would like this bit of ground we have goats breeding there for meat as all the wild meat is died out. The native well is only 30 yards off the government road.³

Ted's nephews, Sam and Walter, are already at their new camps where the mail track crosses the western boundary of Balcanooka Station, digging with the missionaries for water to sustain the new settlement. Jim has stayed back at Ram Paddock, encouraging more families to make the move east. At least, that's why he had tells them he is still there. After his rounds of the camps in the mornings, he stops in at Rebecca's hut to share a quiet cuppa from her billy. They do not speak a lot, but it is something - and someone - for them both. Which is how Rebecca knows about the several circumstances conspiring against the establishment of the new settlement. And why she is inclined to agree with Ted and seek a permanent camp where they were.

Quorn, Flinders Ranges 2001

Daisy has just produced the most amazing artefact that trumps the copied photographs I have brought for her. A copy of a letter by Ted Coulthard, arguing against the move to Nepabunna.

2nd the.
protector of (Alto) Ram Padlock Guts.
to Angurpenia State
Dec 23. 12. 30

Will you please try and get us building prop
at Ram Padlock Guts. the nature well we
would like you to try. M^r Bob & White for two
mile long & one mile wide M^r Thomas we know
you us Hookpore ground that there are
four springs on that run but the year us
the dry end he cut off the four springs
the young fellows have and are still trying
to get water but they cannot go on any
longer with the rations they are getting for
the bare & low land on sea.
and Oblige
Ted Coulter.

ps
M^r White is in Adelaide now you might catch
him and talk the matter over why we would like
this bit of ground we have got. breeding them
for rat meat as all the wild meat is based on
the nature well is only 30 yards off the government
road.

this is Rebecca Forbes's
writing

'This is a letter she wrote for the land', she says, sliding a copy of it across the table that I can keep. Daisy has written on it 'This is Rebecca Forbes writing' in her own rounded hand.

'Real curly writing' I say, trying to make out the words.

'So, it was our grandfather went and asked granny, [that is] my grandmother.'⁴

In the family story, Rebecca writes a letter 'for the land', writes 'where's a good bit of land', and the result is the settlement at Nepabunna.⁵ When this letter was written, however, the

settlement of Nepabunna was anything but assured, not least because of Daisy's forebears opposition to it.

Ram Paddock Gate, December 1930

Jim keeps the copies of correspondence together in a tin box underneath his camp stretcher. Lists of tools required for the fencing, dismissed by requests for proof of a viable water supply by government officials. Arguments that if the land is not a reserve, then the government is under no obligation to provide materials for fencing, or for well sinking, for that matter.⁶ It seemed to Jim that the land was proving just as unyielding. First they had dug in soapy ground just near the boundary camp: soft enough to dig, and soft enough to hold no water at all. The second site on the side of a gum creek was hard and flinty, and the men were grumbling they were 'digging for the missionaries not for water', until Fred eventually gave up at 40 feet down with no sign of moisture.⁷

Christmas Day comes and goes at Ram Paddock with as little providence. Hymn singing from the remaining children in the camp sounds thin in the sweltering shade of the brush roof that passed for Jim's church. A few extra rations had been all that Jim had been able to muster for the Christmas 'shout', along with the new supply of blankets from the Government. With so many children recently buried, not even the story of God's gift of the baby Jesus brings much joy; the pain is too fresh, and Jim's conviction too hollow.

Now on Boxing Day, Jim thinks of the packaging and ribbons being carefully folded and tidied away in homes in England, while children play with their new toys and rub their heels raw in their new shoes. So much for the 'promised land'! He hears the familiar crush of gravel as Friday's mail truck eases to a halt at the gate across the track, and turns to see Ted

Coulthard already heaving large canvas sacks from the tray to the ground beside the track. He is grinning, and waves across to Jim.

‘From your mission!’ he calls. The canvas bundles all have the letters NEPABUNNA printed on the side, and Jim feels he owes the mailman an explanation. Lance Nicholls is still in the cabin, keeping the motor idling.

‘It’s what we’re going to call the new place on Balcanoona, once we’ve found water and got the fences up. But here will do for now.’ Lance nods, and his one good eye watches everything, counting the bundles as they come off.

‘That’s it, reckon,’ he says. ‘Merry Christmas. Said I’d be up for lunch at Ragless’s so I better mosey on. Oh, letter for Mrs Forbes in that lot, too. Official.’ His eyebrows arch as he engages the gears with his strong left arm. Jim leans in at the open window.

‘Right, I’ll make sure she gets it. Let Ragless know I’m grateful for that advice he sent about the fencing: galvanised twelve and a half by eleven-forty will do us. Fence will be up soon as the government send the wire.’ Jim pats the roof of the car as he straightens up, suddenly jaunty.

‘Open them up, Ted,’ he calls, and in no time is sorting through tinned meat, toys, clothes, books, material; all a little scuffed and some well used, but there is no doubting the providence of those kindly souls back in Adelaide.

‘Like those kings bringing gifts after the baby Jesus was born,’ says Ted, waving to the others watching from their camps to come over.

‘Yeah’, Jim agrees, hand on his hip, wiping the dust out from behind his glasses with the other hand. He rests a moment, watching the mail truck bump its way towards the old camel depot of Mt Serle.

South Australian State archives, Adelaide, 2003

There is no record of a reply to Ted and Rebecca's letter, asking for a permanent camp at the native well at Ram Paddock Gate. In fact, they write again a month later, sounding a more urgent note. Mr Coles and the policeman have been to visit Ted, threatening to shoot Ted's stock – all thirty odd donkeys and 6 horses, plus the further seventy donkeys owned variously by his brother and the community – if they are not removed in a fortnight.⁸ Mr McLean, still acting as the Chief Protector of Aborigines, wants to know why Ted cannot remove his stock to the 'proposed reserve' at the Nepabunna Springs? After all, 'natives have no legal right to depasture stock on privately owned leases' and Ted has accumulated 'too many head of stock.'⁹ But McLean is also aware that no water has yet been struck at the Nepabunna site, and inquires of Jim 'how do you manage for water supplies in the camp?'¹⁰

I had wondered that myself. 'Nepabunna Springs' weren't really springs, just one of the many catchments for rainfall and soakage seep folded away in the ancient sea beds that had made the Flinders Ranges a sanctuary for thirsty flora and fauna for at least for fifty thousand years of drought and flood.¹¹ But not for one hundred donkeys with summer coming on. Jim replied:

'Our present water supply is carted by donkey wagon from Angepena Station Well. Some of the natives are down at Nepabunna Water hole which has a fair supply but will not last long. There is a spring there that needs shooting and would make that a reliable water, it is just trickling from the soak.'¹²

Jim finishes the letter full of optimism for the well they are working on, now down to 50 feet. It has been slow going due to the lack of explosives; he believes water is sure; and more importantly, this is the best site for a camp, combining open country with protection from

winds. Whatever his hopes are, history has already told me that they will not be able to establish a mission at the boundary. Even Mr McGilp of the Pastoral Board 'is loathe to comment on the possibilities of securing water' there and thinks a better site for the mission might be the eastern boundary near Balcanoona.¹³ But that is too close for Roy Thomas.

Boundary Gate, 2002

Several years earlier, I had become obsessed with taking photographs of gates and fences throughout outback South Australia, marvelling at the variety of fastenings by which the country was parcelled up into yours and mine. The protocols for crossing boundaries – if it's open, leave it open; if it's closed, leave it closed – also intrigued me. I selected my ten best photographs, enlarged them and hung them on lengths of one hundred year old barbed wire either side of a weighty iron sheep gate from the Hawker rail yards. The sign on the gate, and the name of the exhibition, read 'Forgive us our trespasses'. I wrote a meditation on Jesus' saying 'I am the gate. All who come in through me will be saved. Through me they will come and go and they will find pasture. A thief comes only to rob, kill and destroy. I came so that everyone would have life, and have it to the fullest.' (Gospel of John, Ch 10 vs 9,10)

A gate is a place like skin, where inside and outside meet, and one may bleed into the other. There is an apocryphal story about the gate at the Boundary to the Nepabunna block, and the blind old Pastor Samuels who staffed the UAM office in Adelaide for years. Being blind, he had never seen it, although, being blind, he amazed everyone by travelling north and wielding hammer and nails to help build it. Being blind, he imagined the gate shining white in the sunshine he could feel, as radiant as the pearly gates themselves.

Pass through those gates and you might as well be in heaven itself.

Boundary Gate was where Rebecca's son, as a man carrying an Aborigines Exemption certificate, would pull up in his car at two in the morning requesting permission to enter to visit his old mother, just so he could create the inconvenience of dragging the missionary out of bed in order to enact this legislative farce.¹⁴ Boundary Gate was where car loads of merry makers on their way home to Nepabunna, would pull over by the creek, and bury their grog in the tyre beneath the sand, located there for that purpose, before presenting their luggage and themselves to be checked and smelt by the missionary.

I had driven over the grid marking the boundary - '*Inanga Adnyamathanha yarta*. You are now entering Aboriginal Land' – hundreds of times, but had never been to the site of the Boundary Gate camp, just to the left of the road inside the fence and across the creek. When I pulled in to Iga Warta a mile or two further up the road, Josie Coulthard suggested I come with her and the handful of European tourists waiting to go on her Women's Cultural Tour that would take in the site. Josie is a fine educator, leading her students into country, into story and into themselves, and I wrote up an account of the tour afterwards so I wouldn't forget the experience.¹⁵ Boundary Gate camp was an open area by a poor dry tributary which trekked from the hills into the larger creek, and just near the Women's Dreaming site of Damper Hill, *Mai Ambatana*.

'This area was where the people came to after Ram Paddock. This would have been where Nepabunna ended up if they'd found water. I wonder what difference that would have made if Nepabunna was close to a woman's Dreaming site?'¹⁶



Josie Coulthard at Boundary Gate site. Photograph courtesy of Tracy Spencer

One baby – Lynch Ryan – and at least one marriage was solemnised here while the men laboured to find the water that could make a permanent camp. The government managed to build them a stone ration store

‘The people knew there was no water here, but in those days, no one asked their opinion: just told them to dig. Imagine how they felt digging but knowing there’s no water? They knew where all the soaks were along the creek. So after that, they moved to Nepabunna, further to the east, where there was a waterhole.’¹⁷

Then Josie told the story of *Nguthunanga Mai Ambatanha*, when the children split up to look for seeds and became lost, so their mother cooking damper had to sing making steps in the hill and following the bellbird until she could see her son sleeping in the shadow of *Wayanha*, Mt McKinley to the east. Josie sang low, ‘Vacu, vacu, vacu..In the shadow of Wayanha the bellbird is whistling, Follow Follow,’ she explained. At the end, Josie asked the group if they knew the messages of the story, ‘rules for living, environmental, and spiritual.’

‘You remember the three types of meanings? Well yes, the rule for living is for children to pay attention to what their elders tell them, and that kids are likely to do things apart from what you tell them, like split up to find food. Environmental is, like, well, being able to see it here in the landscape. And spiritual is that bit where the mothers singing creates the steps, showing she must have been a spiritual being to have that power.’¹⁸

Minerawuta, January 1931

Mounted Constable Casey has enjoyed his morning ride along the track from Beltana to Angepena. The extended exercise is good for his horse, as well. After watering it at Mudlapena waterhole and passing the time of day with Mrs Snell at the homestead, he sets off to attend to the business of the day.

Norman Coles' complaint is quite specific: he wants Ted Coulthard's donkeys off the well in the Ram Paddock, and in fact wanted everybody – people, stock, goats, dogs, missionaries – off his lease altogether. Never wanted them in the first place, and now Roy Thomas has given them somewhere to go, they could bally well go there. MC Casey's job was fairly straight forward. He would serve Coulthard his final notice, and that would be that.

Winnie sends her sixteen year old daughter, Joyce, to find her father and warn him the policeman is coming back again. Ted stands at the gate as the uniformed man approaches, and when he is close enough to wonder if he must dismount to get the gate himself, Ted opens it instead and ushers the visitor in. With the reins hanging loose and the horse lost in its nosebag, the two men stand, talking.¹⁹

'Can't move my plant to *Nguthunanga Mai Ambatanha*, at that boundary there; no fences yet, and no water either. Only soaks keeping the people going, *inni*? And can't shepherd this mob round here, all drought country now. *Nipapanha Awi Urtu* not got much, and won't last, either, not that waterhole. You can see that, boss.'

MC Casey lets that talk roll past him, and returns to his task. 'If your stock aren't gone in a fortnight, I will deal with them under the Impounding Act.'

‘You can’t sell them if you do impound them,’ Ted rejoins, without pause.

Stung, Casey retorts, ‘They’ll be sold to the highest bidder, who can shoot them or do whatever he likes with them.’ He knows he is on shaky ground. ‘Anyway, shouldn’t need to. You said yourself there’s water at Nepabunna Springs: take them there and shepherd them, or shoot them here and be done. Too many on this country anyway.’

Ted looks like a thunder cloud, then raises his eyes and stands considering the hills that frame this small open flat.

‘Whose country anyway,’ he says, still looking past the Constable to the hills.

‘This is Mr Coles and Whyte’ country, you know that.’

‘Lease, boss, just a lease. Coming to its end soon, *inni*? Then government give it back to us, back to the ones they took it off in the first place. I know this.’ Ted is looking straight at Casey, who is staring fixedly at his horse. He is experienced enough to know when to leave.

‘A fortnight, that’s it.’ Casey remounts. Ted is no longer looking at him, but hard at the dry ground receding to the east. It’s a death march for his animals, his enterprise, his family if he goes. But these whitefellas don’t care, long as they’ve got what they want. Ted is wise enough to know when to say nothing. He doesn’t even watch the Constable leave.

Back at Beltana, MC Casey would write in his report:

‘Coulthard is a hard man and requires firm treatment. He has a certain amount of education and collects advise (sic) from every disaffected person in the district. His present advisor is a Mrs Lount of Yudnamutna, who has decided communistic views. She has advised the natives not to shift as the country was once owned by Coulthard’s ancestors and will again be granted to them by the Crown if they hold out long enough.’²⁰

Ted continues to wait for word from the Chief Protector of Aboriginals, but he is not only waiting. He has other irons in the fire, other favours to call in.

* * * *

Jim is already on his way to Ted and Winnie's camp, letter in hand. He is walking fast, and frowning. He is angry. The Chief Protector could well have asked Ted to answer the questions in the letter himself, instead of making the missionary his go between. Ted is standing outside the hut, ready for him.

'This came,' Jim says, handing the letter to Ted.

'It's to you,' Ted says, reading from the top of the page.

'Should be to you,' Jim replies. Ted hands Jim another letter in reply.

'See what he wrote to me.'²¹ Both men are reading each other's letters, Ted's considerably shorter than that addressed to Jim.

'Is that right, you can't have stock on the leases?' Jim asks.

'Yeah. Hunting, walking through, even making a camp, that's alright. 'Traditional', I heard is says in those leases. You reckon my donkeys are 'traditional'? Been doing it as long as there's been leases here, just about.' Ted is grinning.

'You going to go then?'

'*Nipapanha Awi Urtu*? Nah. Maybe wait here a bit longer and see. Maybe something else. Policeman is wrong: might be some other 'courses of action open to me', he parodies.

'Angepena owes me wages, and they got that old White well up near the Boundary now. Might see what I can work out with old Snell.'²² His face turns serious. 'That old lady been calling for you again. Annie Ryan. You better go. And take Mrs Forbes too, I reckon.' Jim feels that familiar cold clutch around his heart, and breathes in.

As he makes his way through the camp he lists off the families in his head: Dick Coulthard still here; Fred and Jessie McKenzie camping at *Nipapanha Awi Urtu*. Jack and Alice, still

here, worrying about their own donkey teams. The Wiltons: up at the boundary now. Frank and Nellie Driver too, and that comes as a small relief. Nellie could be hard work. He walks past Sydney and Annie's camp, to where Mrs Forbes is cooking a mess over the fire in front of her old camp, the one she and her old man lived in when Jim had first come to *Minerawuta*. She looks up at him, but says nothing.

'Mrs Forbes. How are you?' She nods. Jim has become accustomed to her, and smiles in response. He goes on. 'Ted thought you and I might look in on old Annie,' and he tips his head back towards the camp behind his right shoulder. 'She's still poorly.'

'Right.' Mrs Forbes stands up and goes into the hut and re-emerges with her carpet bag. 'She's been sounding awful all night, Mr Page. Can't be long.'

* * * *

Rebecca is wearing her white pipeclay on her head, and sitting with the other Mathari women. Once again the camp is full of families who have arrived within hours of Annie's death, to pay their respects. Not far off, by the graves, sit the *Arruru* camp of mourners. Rebecca watches them through her mask, and feels goosebumps ripple across her skin. The *Arruru* women are not making a sound, and it chills her. There was to be no wailing. Word went around the camp – fuelled by Mr Eaton – of Annie's last words to old Sidney. 'You no cry alonga me old man, me go to the Father.'²³ No wailing, no singing. The silent mourners huddle in the dust, picking at the chips of rock in the ground, casting frequent glances at the fresh earth mound beside the white gravelled graves of Polly and Frome Charlie.²⁴ The final words of the missionary still hang in the air over the subdued camp: 'She has gone to a Happy Land.'²⁵

Unbidden, the strains of 'The Sweet Bye and Bye' play through Rebecca's mind, and she is flooded with the fresh memories of her Jack's funeral:

There's a land that is fairer than day,
And by faith we can see it afar;
For the Father waits over the way.
In the Sweet, by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore...'

Rebecca wonders why Jack was not buried with his Arruru aunt, Polly. She contemplates the fragments she knows of the Adnymathanha kinship system for a time, until her eyes ultimately drift, as they always do, towards her *artu's* grave. Absently she watches the clouds building up in the west, and wonders if there will be rain? Several of her companions are also watching the sky, and she listens to their whispered talk.

'Gonna be rain?'

'Might be. No singing though.'

'But she's gone to Jesus, that one. Remember? That's what she told the old man. She's gone that way, don't worry about her.'

'That Jesus going to send the rain, then? Or them old fellas still.'

'Don't know.'

This was the first time there had been no wailing for the dead.²⁶ The camp were trusting Annie's Jesus to take that *wangapi*, wash her, and guide her back to country.

Quorn November 2006

Rebecca's granddaughter, Daisy Shannon, had passed away after a short illness, and I caught The Ghan over night from Alice Springs to attend her funeral. As the funeral card suggested, it was a day of 'tears and laughter...remembering a mother, sister, aunt, cousin, grandmother, sister-in-law, mother-in-law and friend.' As a friend, I felt very much a part of the

Adnyamathanha family, and family photos were taken that day to be used at the back of my book about Daisy's grandmother, when it was published. I spoke with many people; Margaret Brown (nee Coulthard) invited me around the next day to give me some information she had found on Nepabunna.

That night I did not sleep. Back home in Alice, my family were in chaos, and I could only hang on the end of a phone and listen, and repeat it all to my friend Shirley who sat with me through the night, both hoping it would make sense in the morning light.

Mid-morning I went to visit Margaret, an ample woman with a generous heart, and made copies of Fred Eaton's letters and a report he titled 'Ten Years with the Nepabunna Aborigines' and tucked them into my suitcase to read later, while I decided whether to continue my trip to the '*Historicising Whiteness*' conference in Melbourne as planned, or return to Alice Springs although my husband railed against it. When I finally caught the bus to take me on south, the rain slanting across the large windows seemed a sign of things to come, and I buried myself in reading the material Margaret had given me.

Eaton's report told me about many things: the various attempts made at sinking wells, building projects, and Annie Ryan's death, which concluded with this small and innocent paragraph:

'Soon after Annie passed away rain fell at the Boundary Gate and the natives told the missionary that there would be plenty of water in the soaks to last for a few months, so the people packed up and the whole camp made their home at the boundary for a time. When one water soak gave out others were found and so our needs were supplied for the time.'²⁷

Fred Eaton may not have understood the significance of this weather event. But I had heard the talk at enough Adnyamathanha funerals to guess at its import. Annie had made her crossing, and sent the water down in her country like a final blessing. Those with donkey

teams at *Minerawuta* could finally move: *Nipapanha Awi Urtu* was full, as were other rock holes through the ranges.

Ted in the meantime had taken care of matters himself. Snell agreed to the arrangement: a small strip of Angepena's land along the boundary with Balcanoona, with White's well and a spring, enough for Ted's stock. Ted had no trouble picking up bits and pieces of fencing material on his travels, carting up and down the station tracks, and he began to fence his land himself. Ted even inquired whether that part of the pastoral lease might be officially handed over to him, but as the law forbade Aboriginal ownership of land, settled for a handshake with Snell.²⁸ His stock were watered and safe from Mr Whyte, and away from the policeman's eye. *A fairly satisfactory 'course of action'*, he thinks to himself.

Jim wrote to the Protector, reporting:

'I have seen [Ted] and I understand that all the native stock has been removed from the Ram Paddock Gate. However some of them are running now on some one else's property.'²⁹

Jim declined to say whose property, or where. He does not interfere in Ted's arrangements, any more than he followed the Chief Protector's suggestions to force Ted into a camp with no provisions for his stock. Not that I think he could have, anyway. Ted was not that sort of man, and neither was Jim.

'Nepabunna', via Copley, February 1931

Jim has given the task of writing articles for *The Messenger* magazine to Fred Eaton, and Fred hums to himself as he writes on the crude desk he has set up in the lee of the tent he has erected at the boundary camp. There is theology in all the events unfolding around him, and he brims with the thrill of it.

“Please let me explain the word to you. Nepa means FLAT ROCK, Bunna means HIM. ‘Directly the natives told me the meaning of the word, my mind went to Him who is the Rock of Ages. In 1 Peter 2:6 it speaks of Jesus as the Chief Corner Stone. Now, as we know, a foundation stone has to be flat or you couldn’t build on it, so you see by our name we have a foundation name, and the longing of our hearts is that all the dear souls of this station will build upon Nepabunna. That is what the Lord has called us to do, to point a way to Calvary that these poor souls in darkness may have the Light of Life.’”³⁰

Fred’s humming has assumed the familiar chords of ‘Rock of Ages’, and for a moment he recalls visiting that deep sheltering split in the Mendip Range in the South country of Mother England. Like the country parson sheltering from storm and rain, he had let his adolescent body into the crevice and imagined himself safe. ‘Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee...’ Looking beyond his pool of shade to the open stony ground scoured and crucified by millennia of wind under the glare of white light, Fred projects every ounce of his belief into the picture he paints. His hum changes and begins to bounce along in upbeat jerks, to the words of a favourite chorus:

Build on the rock
The rock that ever stands
Build on the rock and not upon the sands.
You need not fear the storm or the earthquake shock
You’re safe forever more if you build upon the rock.³¹

Fred writes:

‘We are looking forward to possessing the land, and hope it won’t be that we just look at it, as poor Moses did.’³²

He continues his Biblical vision, describing in Gospel terms the saving of the poddy lambs, now being fattened up on goat’s milk. Fred licks his pencil, and pauses, before the next paragraph breaks upon him. Like the Acts of the Apostles, he writes an account of testimonies and conversions:

‘Albert, a man that we have prayed for; and only last week he told me that the old life was gone, and that he was going to follow Jesus. Well, he said at the meeting no more was he

going to drink and waste his money, but spend it on something that was going to do good, such as clothes and boots for his children. "I belong along Jesus now." Ted Coulthard gave a fine testimony. He said the natives, before we came here, didn't have a God and it was no use saying they had; but now they had because we had shown Him to them and he was going to follow Him. Many others stood up and witnessed, and at the finish about twenty or thirty stood right up."³³

Fred looks up to see Jim hailing him, and he lays down his pen and closes over the sheaf of papers in his ledger book, to be finished later on.

Ted and Dick Coulthard are squatting on their heels, and Jim is fixing them pannikins of tea. He hands one to Fred Eaton, who joins them, and pulls over a gasoline tin to sit on. Everything about this camp is not quite real for Jim. The well that has no water, the boundary that has no fence, the tents that are not homes, and even the strange hillock that neither rises nor falls nor grows anything at all. And now Ted is talking about giving up the initiation customs. His older brother keeps his silence, while Ted talks with care and with emphasis, about the change he sees coming. Mission way, he says. Fred Eaton is nodding earnestly, and Jim suspects he has spoken with Ted about this before.

'Well,' Jim begins, and stops. He has stumbled across another way to approach this, and he smiles. 'The well. Ted, you and the other fellas might want to keep thinking about that one. But we've got to find a well, for water.'

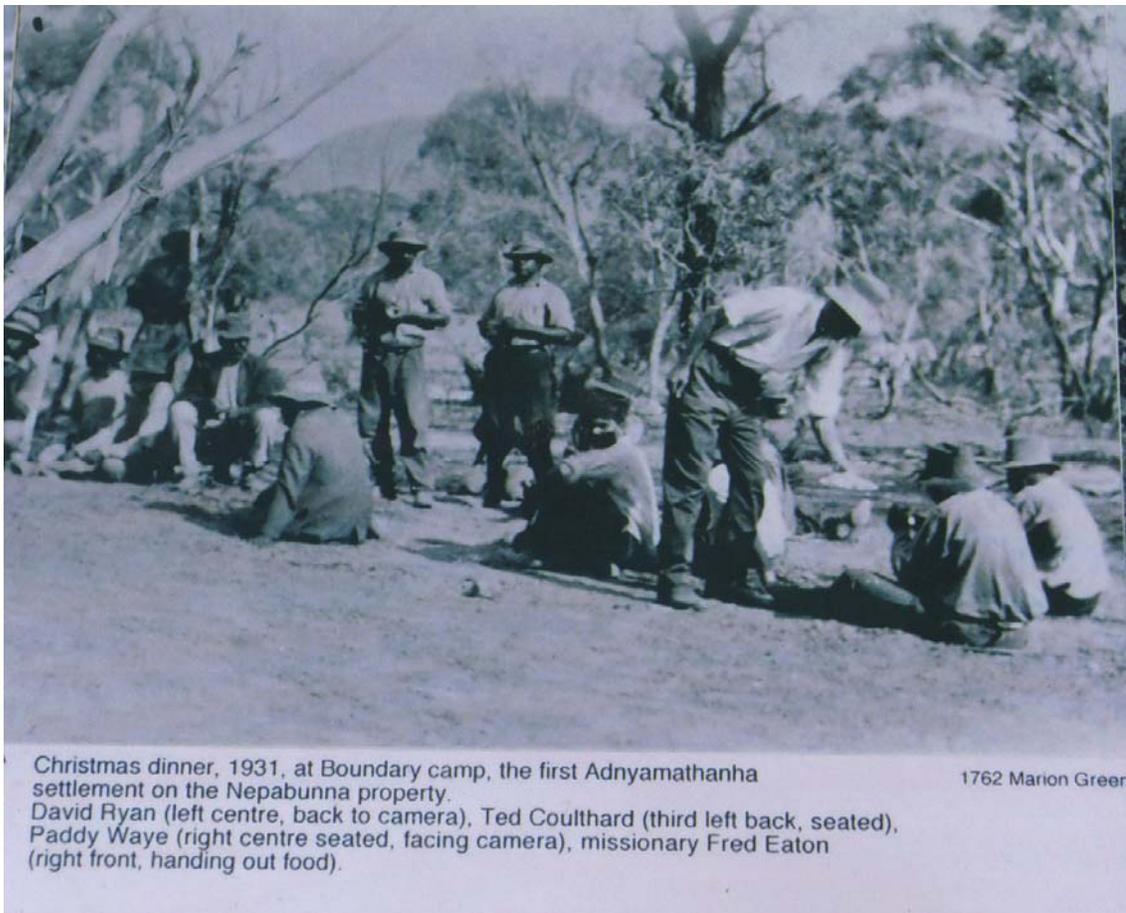
'Those soaks are pretty right for this mob now,' Ted countered.

'For now. But not for long. And the government won't give us our fence until we've got enough water. That well on the bank no good. Can we dig out that soak in the creek? Or else we'll have to look somewhere else. The well, that's what we've got to get for the people right now. Right Fred?' Fred Eaton is looking non-plussed, but he nods, a little sourly. Both he and

Jim know that Jim has little to contribute to the well sinking himself, being largely ignorant of such things, and not much at wielding a shovel.

‘Yeah, we’ll try the creek,’ agrees Fred, without much enthusiasm. Jim stands, and the other men do too.

‘We’ll talk more about that other thing, Ted, alright?’ says Jim, and that is enough for now.



Iga Warta, Flinders Ranges, 2001

Cliff Coulthard, Ted’s oldest grandson, looks me straight in the eye and tells me what he heard.

But Page said things to my people: he made a comment to the Adnyamathanha people saying that “You people got your own God, like you worship a God, and I worship the same God as you do, but only you do it in a different way. You have your ceremonies, and you do dances for your God, on this land, earth and so on”. James Page knew that they were worshipping the same god and we always say ‘Arra Wathanha’, [meaning] ‘the person up there, looking down’. In Adnyamathanha culture they don’t say whether he’s male or female, they just say ‘the person up there’.³⁴

I would recall his words many times in conference papers – ‘I worship the same God as you do, but only you do it in a different way’ – finding in this gentle recognition and acceptance a more radical theology that I could have imagined for a UAM missionary. Ten years earlier, a Korean theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung caused a stir with her opening address at the Seventh World Council of Churches in Canberra where she proposed a bodhisvatta, Kwan In, Goddess of Compassion, as a feminine image of Christ, and went further to affirm the Spirit of God in the spirits full of *han* in Korean culture.³⁵ Syncretism! some cried. Spirit of God, said others, and reminded the gathered assembly not to go calling for the Spirit too much, ‘because the Spirit is already here with us...busy working hard with us. The only problem is that we do not have eyes to see and ears to hear the Spirit.’³⁶ Not long afterwards a ‘Rainbow Spirit theology’ was written by Indigenous Christians in Australia, declaring ‘The Creator Spirit hunts with us, shares our food, camps with us, speaks our languages, dances our ceremonies and sleeps by our fires.’³⁷ Cliff was telling me the same thing in the memories of Jim Page:

But you know, people like Page probably went to - I think he went to some of the ceremonies too and looked at it. And he looked at it in a different way. Our people were worshipping God; that is *Arra Watha-nha*, they called him. And you know every time you’d do something wrong, they’d look up - and even they done it when I was a kid too. We’d listen to grandfather and them in the seventies, like all the old people. Like there’s Walter Coulthard and old John McKenzie and old Pearl McKenzie and all the elders that I worked with. Rufus Wilton, old Archie McKenzie too. Even go back to old Fred Johnson [who] told me a lot of stuff and he was an old doctor man. As well, Fred Johnson. Some of them had white blood in them and but they studied the

spiritual values like the *wilyeru*. Another old lady was old May Wilton, she was really good. They see things as you can't do anything wrong - you can't swear or anything - because you know *Arra Watha-nha*'s looking down on you. You know, everything in terms of Aboriginal culture is based on that. And where nature works with it and a lot of plants come up at certain times because they might have used it for certain ceremonies or whatever. It's all done spiritual and they've got this contact to *Arra Watha-nha* at all times. And I think that's how the Adnyamathanha survived over thousands of years.³⁸

In a time of radical transition, memories of Jim's affirmation of Adnyamathanha religion in terms of the new Christian religion, enabled a pathway into the future, that enlarged and preserved the past.

The Mail Track east of Copley, February 1931.

Ted has hitched up his donkeys to Mrs Forbes bun cart, and sits up the front with her as they crawl comfortably east along the mail track. Young Jack is in the back with two of Ted's youngsters, Joycey and Sandy. Raymond is asleep amongst the misshapen sacks of their scant belongings, leaning at an odd angle against the dark wood of Rebecca's sea chest. Rebecca twists on her hard seat to check her youngest boy, and for a moment lets her gaze lie on the jumble of hills she has not seen like this since Jack first drove her into this country. There is not a living soul left at the Ram Paddock Gate, only rapidly crumbling remains of what had become her home – their home – for a time. Rebecca turns again in her seat, eyes fixed on the track ahead, but she is seeing something else.

In the dim light of her hut in the middle of the cluster of dwellings that had been *Minerawuta*, Rebecca is watching Jim swirl his pannikin to dissolve the last crystals of sugar at the bottom of the cup. He swallows down the sweetness, along with a tea leaf of two, and hands the cup back to her. She places it on top of the sack she is packing.

‘So you’re nearly ready?’ the younger man enquires. Rebecca does not answer. She is too sad to be angry with such comments. ‘I can have a tent put up for you at the boundary camp, if you like.’ Jim knows this must be worrying her, with no husband and only young sons to make a new camp for her.

‘No, thank you.’ *Not the boundary*, she thinks. *Not stuck there in no mans land scraping out soaks to stay alive*. A fleeting memory of turning on the taps in the downstairs of the Islington house flashes through her mind, and she remembers the sound of water splashing against the porcelain of the jug as she filled it.

‘Or, Mrs Forbes, I could arrange for you to get a ride into Copley, if that would be better...’ Jim does not know how to raise the matter. It was an aberration after all, having a white woman living on a mission. So far he had avoided discussing the matter with UAM headquarters, but it would surely be raised soon. It was after all a mission to Aborigines, not other white people. And now her husband was gone, well... Jim knew what headquarters would say. He ought to encourage her to leave now, find a place in one of the railway towns perhaps.

Rebecca knows the arguments well, and hears them in Jim’s offer. She has thought the options round and round in her mind as she has watched family after family pack up and move out, until she begins to feel afraid left alone with the ghosts and the strange growlings in the trees at night. She cannot stay here. But where should she go? She thinks of the letter she received from the Chief Protector months ago, and the stilted conversation Mounted Constable Casey attempted, trying to encourage her to move to Beltana on ‘white rations’.³⁹ She was non-committal then, but everything in her recoiled from ‘living white’ again, as they put it. Far away from her sons’ people. Her husband’s people. Her people. She does not even

know what Jack would have done, if he were still alive, let alone what she should do without him. He had never lived on a mission, preferring to camp where he worked. Not that he minded the missionaries: stopping the grog and teaching the kids was one thing, but living under someone's rules was another. Jack may well have loaded up their wagon and gone back north, looking for other camps he could call on to give him and his family a home. But he was gone, and those relationships weren't open to her. Neither, she thinks, can she find a cottage in Copley, or Beltana, whatever Casey might say. Oh, she could work perhaps, take on cleaning at the hotel, but she remembers the hard eyes and closed faces she met when she stayed in that tiny town with her boys. They would never accept her or her children as one of them. And in truth she wasn't, either. She had left that life behind when she walked out of the Bourke Registrars office. 'Life's a lottery!' she had remembered herself writing from her berth below decks on the *Oruba*, and a wry smile creeps across her face. Jim notices, and sits up straighter, waiting.

'Don't ask me to leave, or to return from following my sons' people. Where they go, I will go. Where they live, I will live. These people are my people, and I live with them, in their way, according to their customs, even their God, Mr Page. I'm going to die near my husband, you know, somewhere in this country. This is where he brought me, and this is where my sons are happy, and the people look out for us right way. I'll ask them where I should go. Ted will be coming by to shift those other donkeys off Yankaninna shortly. I'll ask him, he's family.'⁴⁰ Rebecca is surprised at the strength of her decision, and stands up, wanting suddenly to escape the close confines and the company. She fears Jim's response, until it comes.

'Good. I am glad for that Mrs Forbes. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help. I'm heading back up to the boundary shortly, if there's anything you need. The ration store is

nearly built there, so call in for rations too.’ Jim is also standing, and feels strangely comforted. He had not realised how much her presence meant to him, and how he had been worrying about what would become of her, and him, if she left. He smiles at her, and she smiles back, almost blushing as she looks down at her dark dress and smooths down the skirt. That’s how it had been decided.

Rebecca and Ted did pull in for rations at the Boundary, before continuing east to *Nipapanha Awi Urtu*, where Ted’s sons are busy making a camp for the Forbes family not far from their own. Rebecca is remembering how clear the water was when Jack first brought her in *Adnyamathanha yarta*, and how good it felt to swim in it while their clothes dried on the flat rocks of the banks. She had wanted to stay there then, but Jack had taken them on to Mt Serle, promising a place to ‘settle down’. She is not thinking about settling down this time, only about the water that will keep her and her boys alive.

Nepabunna 2001

I did not know it then, but Granny Gertie’s opening statement to me about Mrs Forbes was a map of Rebecca’s belonging with the *Adnyamathanha* community.

The two boys grewed up here, [at] Mt Serle. We all went to Ram Paddock Gate and stayed there. She used to deliver the babies [for] all these aborigine [women]. She used to get up in the nighttime and deliver it. She was really good help for the people. They taught her a lot of other [things]. Yes, she was good woman - a white woman - to come and stay with us.⁴¹

She stayed. Through all that was to come, Mrs Forbes stayed with the Adnyamathanha community.

Boundary Camp, March 1931

To Chief Protector of Abos.

'Regarding the well we have reached 72 ft and no water is showing and no indications. I have decide (sic) to abandon the attempt.

What do you advise re this matter it will be useless attempting another well on amateur advice.

This well has taken 5 mths to sink and the need is urgent as we have no permanent water supply. I am negotiating with Mr Ragless of Balcanoona Station for permission to camp with the natives on Ookaboolina Well.

The winter coming on demands that we have a settled camp.

Trusting you will do your utmost to help us at this time.

Yours faithfully,

Jas Page.⁴²

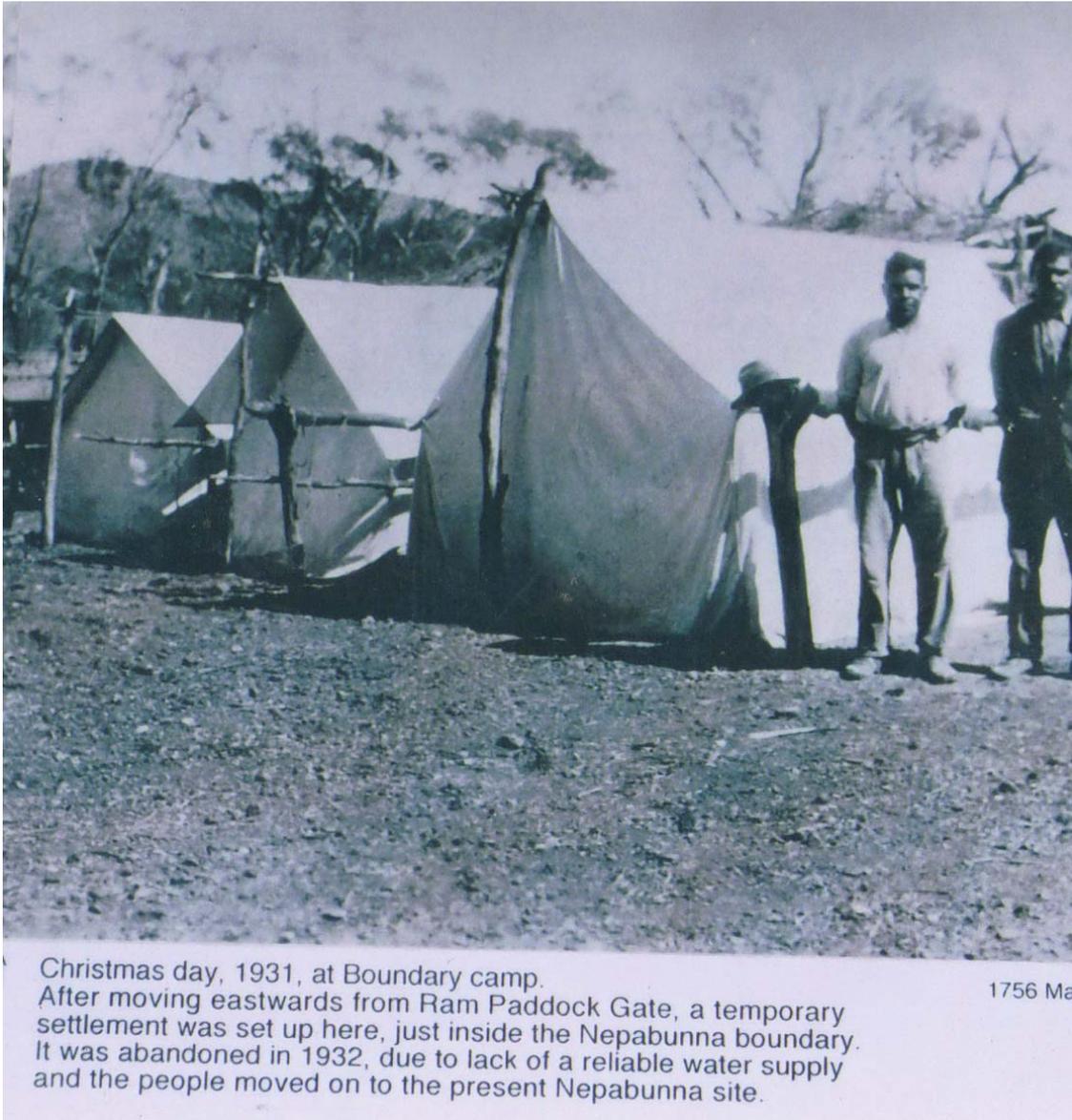
Jim feels the coolness of evening stealing through the sagging canvas of his tent, stiffening his forearm, tense from penning this note. The unshaved skin tight across his clenched jaw tingles in the night air, and yet Jim will not put away his things just yet. He reaches under his cot for the box of letters he keeps there, and takes out the packet of flimsy folded papers bearing their English postmarks. He gently slides the upper most sheet from its binding, and unfolds it beside the oil lamp.

...It is so hard for me to imagine a dry well, and especially at forty feet. Still, I am glad the indications are good, and that you will soon have sweet cool water for everyone. Will you fit a pump to it? I like to think of the village that will spring up around it, there in what you call 'the bush'. Are there at least some tall trees for shade? I long to see it for myself, of course, and your sweet offer to squire me about the valley were I there almost had me blushing! Of course I would be delighted to do the same for you if you came to visit my dear valley. England has changed so, since you left...

Jim lifts the paper to his face, and breathes in ink and rose water. He smoothes it out on the surface of his makeshift table, and prepares his reply, but with a heavy heart.

'...I fear I have misled you, for we have had to abandon the well and am at the mercy again of begging to use Ookaboolina beyond our land, or using the one waterhole for all of washing, drinking and stock. The men tell me in winter the children can collect sheets of ice from the waterhole in what they call 'frost valley'. I do not know how much longer they will stay with the mission, when we cannot even provide the most basic of their necessities. Forgive me, love, and pray for me. Pray for this mission, and these people, led into the wilderness and thrown upon the grace of the Lord. Pray the Lord will provide for us, soon...'

There are soaks all along the creek that burrows its way along the base of the hills. Jim's hands are dry and his nails ripped from digging, just on spec, hoping to chance a likely spot. It never works. The signs are there for those who can read them, the power of the wet earth calling to those who can divine it. A pick and shovel is such a dumb instrument for such delicate work. Dangerous work, too. There is a lot of faith in the timbering that makes a square jaw from the giving earth; each bucket of gravel travelling up to the top man, while the bottom man prays nothing will fall into the depths, onto him, from that height. Jim had never been able to do it. 'Look Fred, I can't do it...I don't know the first thing about it,' he had said to Fred.⁴³ Fred was scared too, he could see that, but he went down. Not Jim. Instead, he wrote increasingly frustrated letters to the Chief Protector, pleading for someone to help who knew what the hell they were doing. Because he certainly didn't.



Photograph from Iga Warta Display, courtesy of Tracy Spencer

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Life Writing Chapter Fifteen Nepabunna

Boundary Camp, 1931

27th March
Mr Jas Page
Nepabunna Mission,
COPLEY

...I do not know of anything I can do at present to assist you in the selection of another site [for a well] but will keep the matter before me and if any opportunity presents itself will do what I can to assist you.

Yours faithfully
Chief Protector of Aboriginals⁴⁴

Fred Eaton would later write:

...The men went on with the well sinking. A start was made in the middle of the creek and was sunk to a depth of ten feet and a flood came down and filled up the well. It was felt that something would have to be done soon and word was given to Mr Page that there was a rock hole some four miles further east near the mail track called the Nepabunna rock hole; the missionary was told it was very seldom dry. This rock hole was inspected, and once more a move was made. It seemed that our people were like the children of Israel in search of the promised land; many times they got discouraged and murmuring was heard but wise council soon altered things and the people didn't need the punishment as the Children of Israel did who murmured against God and Moses. The day came when the whole camp was ready for the four mile trek which consisted of donkey teams, and wagons were laden with household effects also carts, buggies and drays drawn by donkeys; many of the people walked.⁴⁵

Nepabunna, August 2002

Rosie, Lorna and Rita had come with me from Copley, to visit their sister Mona Jackson at Nepabunna, and to show me where Mrs Forbes first camp had been. Gladys Wilton came with us, as we all bundled into my car and I drove tentatively along the dirt track that led over the bare rise and then down towards the confluence of creeks.

‘Pull up here’ someone demanded, and I did, on a gravely flat. We piled out of the car, and the elderly women began fanning out in ones and twos, pointing and exclaiming to me as they inspected the sites of their childhood again. I worried for some of them, moving about on the uneven ground, seeing the past as much or more than they noticed the loose gravel under their feet.

‘That was Mrs Forbes camp.’ Mona pointed to a rectangle of stones higher up on the rise. A broken camp oven was still sitting in the remains of the stone fireplace, and twists of wire on the ground betrayed her kitchen hooks.

‘She had a chair out here where she sat when the shade came over.’

‘And a stick in the ground here so she could tell the time, see where the shadow fell. Then when it got to the right place she would come walking over the hill, when it was time for the store to give out rations.’

‘Or she would walk to the top of the rise and look out and see if there was dust coming down the road yet. That would be the mail, or her son Raymond coming back from the station on his pushbike for the weekend.’⁴⁶



Remains of Mrs Forbes hut, Nepabunna. Photograph courtesy of Tracy Spencer.

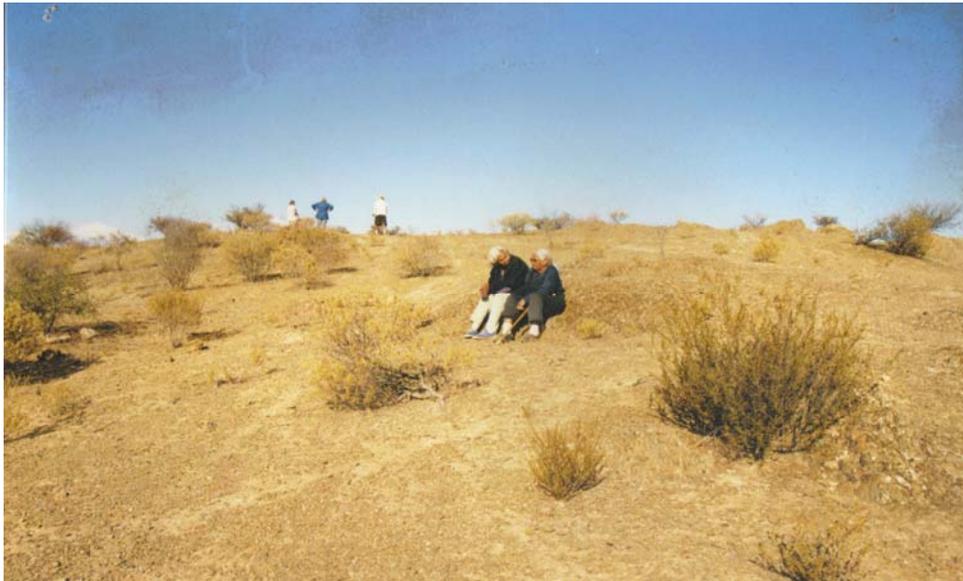
To the left and closer to the creek, are the remains of Rufus and Ethel Wiltons camp; to the right and on the creek bank was where the Ryans had put up their huts. On the hillside across the creek is where Ted and Winnie Coulthard had laid out their spread. In the creek itself, where gullies join the Finke creek stand two thick gum trees, and Gladys comments as we walk past:

‘That big gum is the teddy bear tree. There was a well beneath it too, a deep one. The kids were told not to go near it. They’d hear it growling. Mrs Forbes said it was only the birds.’⁴⁷

Gladys, the youngest of the group, walks with me further up the creek, until we reach the smooth flat slanted blue rock of the waterhole.

‘This first waterhole is where we’d come to do our washing. Sit here all day and go back at evening...There’s lots of bushtucker still around here – *nguri, urti, maiaka*.’⁴⁸

When we return, Lorna and Dolly are watching us from where they sit on the hillside, hugging their knees, near the ruins of Mrs Forbes hut, smiling.



Photograph courtesy of Tracy Spencer

Mrs Forbes' first hut was built on the side of the hill, across the creek and closer to the waterhole near the Coulthards. Soon she relocated to the site of the ruins, alongside the other families, and half way between the Nepabunna waterhole where Mr Eaton continued to work with a handful of men to blast out a well, and the stone buildings of the mission staff, church and store located on the flat, where the passing traffic could pull up and pass the time.

Between these two poles – water and rations - campfires were made and billys were boiled, children scooted about on foot and on donkeys, Eric McKenzie was the first baby born⁴⁹, and the news of the day was broadcast each evening by Fred McKenzie and Dick Coulthard, the *Arruru* and *Mathari* leaders. They kept an eye on the camp, reminding the youngsters that *Arra Watha-nha* – and their aunts and uncles – saw everything that happened so they had better watch out.

There was a rhythm to life at Nepabunna in those times. Early morning, the children would check the rabbit traps, and roast rabbit for breakfast with salt and pepper over the tiny fire they built by their way.⁵⁰ The rest were taken home where their mothers were already up, ready to shoo the older children off on their next chore. By the time the missionary came around the camps to gather the children for 'school', the day was half over, and the children were glad to sit in the shade of the bough shelter erected along the side of one of the whitewashed mission buildings. School finished at lunchtime' and the children were off to more chores, hitching the donkeys to the small carts that carried the forty gallon water drums to the waterhole, while the bigger children walked beside them with a yoke over their own shoulders, holding their bodies straight to take the weight of the square gasoline tins filled with water.⁵¹ A photograph from this time shows a young Gertie and Rosie Pondi on such an

errand; the photograph has perished in parts, but a figure in a long grey coat can also be seen, carrying her tins too beside the gorge walls near the rockhole.

‘Mrs Forbes used to carry water from the waterhole, on like a pole across her shoulders with a bucket hanging each side,’ Gladys tells me.⁵² Inside Mrs Forbes hut, billy cans of water hung by the range built into the fireplace, ready for use, and ready to be refilled by passing children who couldn’t say ‘no’ to an older lady. One entire wall inside her hut was taken up with neatly stacked kindling for the cooking fire; every morning Mrs Forbes, like the others, would take a triangle of hessian sacking down the creek, collecting wood to lay across it then tying up its corners to carry it across her back.⁵³

Afternoons finished early, before the spirits of that place began to take an interest in those wandering from the campfires. A small cooking fire punctuated each camp, where the days hunting was cooked and the appropriate parts given to the right people. Small groups drifted about the camps, saying their ‘good evenings’ and catching up on the gossip, as the last of the light flared golden on the leaves and the hills flamed red.

‘As soon as it was dark,’ Gladys told me, ‘she’d be inside and lock the door. I suppose she’d heard of those strange people walking around at night.’⁵⁴ Perhaps that was the time Mrs Forbes read her ‘hair-raising thrillers’ in the greasy glow of the lamp which was a bit of blanket standing up in a tin of dripping, or when she made cuttings from the newspapers that came her way, and pinned them to her hessian walls, to help keep the dust out and the news of the world in.⁵⁵ Through the thin tin walls of her hut, she would hear the singing in the camps – in the changing cadences of *Yura Ngarwala*, and more and more often, Christian choruses sung in English

The Mail truck came from Copley every Friday arriving around 10am: the missionaries sorted the supplies in time for Ration day Saturday, when members of every family lined up at the store with their sacks and cans to receive the allocated amount per family of flour, tea and sugar. Sunday, just before Church began in the pine log building Mr Page had begun, the Mail truck made its return visit from the eastern stations, and took on board any news from Nepabunna to deliver to the Copley postoffice and then south on the Marree Mixed. Parents, and sometimes whole families, came and went from Nepabunna as station work ebbed and flowed. Around Christmas time *yuras* gathered at Nepabunna for Ceremony.

Days, weeks, seasons passed. Still there was no well.

Nepabunna Waterhole, June 1931

Jim stands outside his canvas tent, looking across to the building beside him, and then to the activity beyond. The building on the flat is a rectangular one, built of pine frame and white washed walls, with shingles of flattened kerosene tins. Fred Eaton had put it up in a matter of days in order to receive Mrs Eaton; so far she seems pleased, with her accommodation and with the welcoming concert Jim arranged where the children sang their best choruses.⁵⁶ He had been relieved. She was not like Iris Wade, but Jim feels the same tightening in his stomach when she walks by, her back straight in her neat dresses that won't show the dirt, and smiling.

Fred is organising running races on the flat, as much in his wife's honour as to celebrate a belated Christmas. That had been Fred's idea too, so his wife had discovered amongst the collected charity items, this ridiculous Father Christmas costume that is prickling at Jim's neck and tickling his nose where the whiskers curl as he waits for his cue. Providence! She had said, *everything except someone to find water for them* Jim had thought, then felt guilty

for his ingratitude. As he waits he is thinking in particular of the letter forwarded to him last week from UAM headquarters, from one of the other missionaries pitying their plight.

'I was reading in the 15th chapter of Exodus, and thinking of the holding back of the finding of water at Nepabunna. The 22nd verse reads: "And they went three days into the wilderness and found no water." What a long three days of testing they must have seemed after the wonderful deliverance through the Red Sea, followed by the Song of Praise! And when we think of the wonderful victory and the Song of Praise after the presentation of the Copley Reserve – and now these days of testing. Next came Marah. Is the disappointment in the well sinking the "Marah"? But the bitter was healed after they cried to the Lord and were shown what to do.

Then they came (verse 27) to Elim, where they were refreshed and rested under the palm trees. Praise the Lord for the Elim rest and refreshment yet to come (Mark 11:24) for Nepabunna.⁵⁷

Jim thinks of the palm trees he knows are growing at Oodnadatta, and his eyes narrow as he watches the other two tall white men holding the rope across the finish line for the runners.

Will Wade – indefatigable, almost unbearable Will Wade, and young Harrie Green, who has been so handy here with his medical book that has become his Bible. Jim grimaces. Will is here to gather camels for his next trip west of Oodnadatta, and this time he is taking Harrie Green with him.⁵⁸ It's not that Jim wishes to leave the mission at Nepabunna, but he feels almost physically the familiar ache to be back on the track where natives can live as they choose, rather than be harried into a dry corner of a scrubby block where they cannot even be assured the most basic of life's essentials, water. Jim adjusts the red woollen cape and tries to pull the whiskers a little lower away from his nostrils, and succeeds in pulling the white contraption off altogether and must hurriedly push it back on his shaved cheeks and hope the glue will still hold. Just then Fred looks towards Jim's tent, and the signal is given. Jim strides across towards the now astonished group on the flat.

'Ho ho ho! Merry Christmas! Sorry to be late, had a few mishaps along the way, but I got here as fast as a could. Ho ho ho!' Children and adults appear rooted to the spot; no one

moves. And then some of the smaller children begin to inch behind the bigger ones, and the women look at the ground. Men start to shift and begin to murmur. Jim can sense fear, dense and suffocating. Mrs Eaton begins to push some of the children towards him, and Jim quickly moves away, to stand by the native pine branch jammed into a 44 gallon drum, and laden with gifts. He reaches for a wrapped present, choosing one with the name of one of the older girls and reads the name in a quiet voice. Then he crouches down beside the tree, and holds the gift out in the direction of its intended recipient. Mr Eaton has moved beside the child's father, and is speaking quietly to him. The man makes a signal, and the girl comes forward to receive the gift.

'Hallelujah, a gift from Jesus!' exclaims Will, and throws his arms in the air. Other children are coming forward now, and Jim is passing out presents as fast as he can. He knows all their names, of course, and can remember which songs each of them can sing, and the sound of their voice. They are grinning at him now, have picked his glasses almost buried behind the white whiskers, and pull at the red cloak and feel the white trim. He has to stand to stop them taking his hat and destroying the deception all together. He begins to laugh, and quickly saves himself, instead bellowing 'Ho ho ho!' You can barely hear it for the children's laughter.

Nepabunna December 2002

I saw my first black Father Christmas at the Nepabunna Christmas party. Santa arrived in a ute, and came and sat down in front of the new sky blue servery in the Community Centre. The trestle tables nearby held only the crumbled remains of the feed the Nepabunna Council members had prepared, and the long room was full of bodies sweating in the warmth of the day and balancing paper plates on their laps. I held my new baby in the cloth sling that kept

him against my body, and my hair was held up off my neck by my peaked cap. It was hot. Gus, my three year old, was a little uncertain when his turn came to sit on Santa's knee, and squirmed to be put down. Clancy, the baby, had no such qualms, his round olive face looking out at me from the security of the red and white lap. I felt for whoever it was inside that suit!

Nepabunna, September 1931

14th September 1931

Nepabunna Mission
Via Copley

To Mr W McLean
Chief Protector

Dear Sir

The oversight of the mission has been handed over to me by Mr Page, and so I shall be corresponding with you in regards to the needs of the natives on this station...

...Hoping I have made myself quite clear,

I am
Yours Sincerely
F. Eaton⁵⁹

Fred is still in the habit of taking his correspondence to show Jim before he posts it, and he is seeking the younger man's approval of the rather pompous way he is begging the Chief Protector for explosives for their well sinking efforts. Chief Protector McLean has made it clear he wants a report on the well before he provides any more.

'What can you tell him?' Jim asks, non-committally, as he continues sawing at the plank he has fixed to the frame of what will be the church. Its length had not been properly measured and was too long.

‘That’s the point. That Mr Pomerey said there would be water here, and we should have hit the main spring by now, but the flow is still too slow. I can’t tell him that.’

‘So wait a little longer.’

‘But we need the explosives now to blow it out, man.’

‘That’s what you’ve said in the letter, then. Well, send it and see.’ As an afterthought Jim adds, ‘It’s a good letter, very clear’ and pulls off the splinters of wood where the cut plank is less than smooth. Fred still stands by him uncertainly.

‘You should write something too.’

‘Me? No, brother, I’ve handed that over to you, remember. I’ve got my hands full here.’

Jim looks at the small group of helpers he has variously sitting and standing about the construction site. Some of the older girls, who were quite strong, as well as some of the men with their new found fervour for Jesus.

‘You should write to Headquarters,’ Eaton insists. ‘We’ve got Miss Turner coming up here next month before the Annual Conference and she’ll be all questions if you don’t.’ Fred was right. Jim’s silence had been noticed by the UAM, and that combined with the continual requests for resources to support them, as none was forthcoming from the government, was causing some concern to the cash-strapped UAM. To their credit, they had paid Mr Pomery, the water diviner from Peterborough, to come up and give his advice. It was only fair they would want to come and see for themselves if that were money well spent. Even Mr Graham’s glowing report last month ‘...The people are intelligent’, happy that they had called a missionary, and ‘could sing over 40 hymns and choruses’ would have only fuelled Violet’s curiosity about why they had not heard of such progress from Jim himself. Jim sighs.⁶⁰

‘Alright. No time like the present,’ and he downs his tools and strolls towards his tent, as much to get away from Fred’s furrowed brow as to write to his bosses.

‘...I am still a tent dweller, like Abraham and Isaac, and likely to be through summer. The whole matter rests on the water supply. The well is down thirty feet, and progress is very slow owing to the hard blue rock. This is an excellent indication of water, which, while handicapping us, is nevertheless encouraging. Brother Eaton has been helping the men on well-sinking while I have finished the church, and he says that there are indications of the rock getting softer. In the meanwhile, we are getting on with the jobs to be done on the station site, such as tanks and foundations.’⁶¹

That ought to keep them happy, he thinks, and on the rest of the piece of paper before him he begins sketching the plans for the roof he must put on the as-yet unfinished church.



Photograph from Iga Warta display, courtesy of Tracy Spencer

Adelaide, November 1931

‘Hallelujah!’ Violet Turner reads on the telegraph from Mr Eaton, and knows their prayers are answered.⁶² She had been so alarmed to see the man descending down that dry well, after regaling her with stories of rocks and buckets and God knows what else falling on him and miraculously missing his head, while he filled up pockets in the rock with powder and hoped the top men would pull him up fast enough to avoid the flying chips of rock when the fuse burnt down. But ‘Water is life’ Rev John Flynn had discovered, in his appointment at Beltana before the first war, and so it was.⁶³ Violet begins her editorial immediately:

‘...How we have been with them in prayer all these weary months, as they have worked on so hopefully and cheerfully. The supply at the waterhole is almost depleted, and, in a few weeks, the precious fluid would have had to be carted from Ookabulina Well, four miles in another direction. (This is not on mission property.) But now they have reached the water, and we raise a heart felt note of praise for this blessing, and for God’s protecting care, that there has been no mishap during the dangerous work with the explosives...’⁶⁴

In the government offices, Chief Protector McLean is thinking less fond thoughts of Nepabunna. He is hamstrung: that pompous missionary dared to write ‘I don’t think the time is ripe for a report’, and still demand more explosives when the flow was only showing 1000 gallons a day! McLean can neither authorise expenditure on that basis, nor close it down while they persevere in their lunatic quest. Meanwhile the lease on Balcanoona is up for renewal, but he daren’t tell the UAM lest they press their cause with still no certainty of survival there.

Neither Chief Protector McLean nor Violet Turner have any way of knowing that it will be the random fall of a hammer down the 50ft well and hitting Fred Eaton’s shoulder, instead of his head, that will finally settled the matter. At that point, Fred will decide ‘that discretion was the better part of valour and we agreed that we had a permanent water supply

anyhow... Truly, as the Bible says "My God shall supply all your need."⁶⁵ Well, enough to scrape by, at least, he hopes.

Nepabunna, Christmas, 1931

Jim sits on a rough form leaning back against the kerosene tin walls of the church, which he has whitewashed, and which he knows will leave soft white powder on his dark waistcoat. The sun is up, and unusually there is little activity to be seen. He is waiting to give the Christmas service inside a church for the first time since he has been with these people. But it has been, he knows, a busy night.

Rebecca has slept late, and the air in her hut is warm and uncomfortably close already. The wind catching the trees in the creek roars like surf above the buzz of insects invisibly burrowed in bark and sand. A crow nearby remarks in its long drawl that this day will be the same as any other. Mrs Forbes is dressing in her dark blue serge, despite the heat, ready for the Christmas service. She adds her felted hat to the outfit, and laces up her boots over her stockings. The dress is even loose, she notices. Ray and Jack have gone down the creek to wash and bring back water for the day. They knew not to wake their mother, when they saw the old carpet bag on the table.

Mrs Forbes had been woken up long after dark by young Joyce Coulthard whispering, 'Mrs Forbes, aunties told me to come get you. They said tell you Mum is down the creek.' Rebecca knew where they had been preparing for this Winnie's tenth birth, and being number ten, Rebecca had not thought to keep a close eye on her. But she had grabbed her bag and gone, surprised to see the old *urngi* in the glow of campfires. It had been a slow and painful

delivery: the baby's leg was twisted, and Mrs Forbes worked to twist the leg back, and save her friend from the damage of such a delivery, at the same time.⁶⁶ They called the baby Evelyn, and right now Mrs Forbes is wondering if she can pay the baby a visit before church.

Mrs Forbes door is shut, and so she is surprised when there is a knock on it. Usually they knew to leave her alone if she had not left it ajar.⁶⁷ And the boys wouldn't knock at all. She opens it, and knows to reach for her bag again by the look in the man's eyes. His daughter, one of the older girls, is unwell, and he wonders could she come.

'Mrs Eaton, she come yesterday and they all prayed that Lords Prayer, and she says that it is only Our Father can make her well, but in the night she's no good again.'⁶⁸ Rebecca says nothing. She has seen this faith in the missionaries' prayers before, and will neither advocate it nor deny it.

The girl is cold, and fevered, as several have been who still drink from the waterhole on the days the well has not yet refilled. Mrs Forbes has plasters, and some bush medicines, that she knows will draw out the fever, and release her, and so she does what she can, and leaves the girl sleeping while she hurries to Mr Page's Christmas service before the sun burns the day and turns the new church into a furnace.

That evening, after another church service, Mrs Eaton writes her Christmas report while the day is fresh in her mind.

'On Christmas morning when I went over to see her, she was better. The lovely part of it was that the women realised just what God can do for us if we pray. Her father had been very anxious about her, but now he was all smiles. He said, 'You know, you pray to the Father two times. First time him get little bit better, next time he get big bit better; all right. Him good Father all right.'⁶⁹

She is feeling contented in her work here; more than that, she is feeling confident. Yes, she is making a difference. She continues writing of her successes:

‘Last Monday there was a big noise, and the camp was in an uproar. Satan’s crowd came in and started fighting... I went over, and found that the men were all contemplating another fight...I said ‘Look, would you like me to ask the Lord to bring peace to their hearts?...So we all knelt in the open, and when we rose from our knees the whole crowd of men walked away and left the camp alone...’⁷⁰

Mrs Eaton thinks the men are making a camp in the hills near by, perhaps within the mission block but she cannot be sure, since the fence is not yet built. The unanswered requests for fencing materials are all but forgotten in the overwhelming quest for a water supply. Even so, camp talk had turned to strangers approaching, and the women seemed scared and excited at once, talking of *mulkada*. She turns the word over in her mind. Of course she had known of native ceremonies at Oodnadatta, and they had not been able to put a stop to them there. But in this Mission block, Fred would need to make a ruling on this she thinks, and tidies away her writing things in the rough set of drawers he has made for her.

Flinders Ranges, 2002

Pauline McKenzie came with me to see Auntie Evelyn Coulthard at her home in Port Augusta, the youngest daughter of Ted and Winnie Coulthard. Her floors were being replaced in her front room, so we crowded around her small kitchen table. Evelyn looked strong, although I knew health concerns had kept her in Port Augusta for some time. Her dark short hair was as neat and tidy as her home. Evelyn’s recollections of Christmas at Nepabunna were clear, and her voice definite.

‘The men would come back at Christmas and there’d be ceremony then too. Once a year, the ceremony was a good time, and we all took part, not that we saw everything. We’d do

the dancing and we'd hide under a blanket. He (man wearing the horns) [*Witana*] was scary. You could see him, but we were afraid...'

...Only the boys had the law, not the girls. We did dancing and that.

...Mr Eaton was good. He used to go out to the camp (the boys camp during ceremony) in case any medicine was needed. There were lots were sick, needed medicine. But he'd go – he wasn't against it...It's a pity they stopped ceremony – it was good. It was the missionary I guess, who didn't like it.⁷¹

Granny Gertie had also been nostalgic for ceremony, or 'rules' as she often called it:

'Ceremony: yes, [God] give that to us. To be good, see. Mr. Eaton knew it, Mr. Page knew it... But he knew what that meant and he knew that God give us that. God give us all those things.'⁷²

Rebecca's sons went through the Law: During that first Christmas season at Nepabunna, young Jack, nearing his twelfth birthday, joined the boys camp, and became *Vadnapa*. In time he would become *Wilyeru*, although the Law would be buried before Raymond could progress past the first stage, *Vadnapa*. Evelyn remembered:

'Mrs Forbes was happy her boys went through the law. She joined in – learnt the dances, got painted up, took them food. She wasn't singing. Some parts she didn't know. But yes she was there.'⁷³

Other aunties played the roles Rebecca could not, but she took blankets and food out to the boys camp to leave for the son she could no longer speak to, or hold. When the women huddled under the blanket while *Witana* strode the dancing ground, she huddled too and did not look out, like some of the young girls did. And when the dancing and the time apart and whatever happened with the boys and men in the camp back in the hills was all over, her son would come back to her a man, and it would all be different. If this saddened her like it might have any mother, I don't know. She did not stop her boys going through.

Nepabunna, February 1932

Mr Gerard's letters lie on the foot of Jim's camp stretcher where Fred left them. Jim knows the gist of them and cannot bring himself to read them. Mr Gerard is furious that he missed out on the chance to have the lease on this block taken out by the UAM; Mr Thomas neglected to tell them the lease was due for renewal. Chief Protector McLean is coy about whether the government could have declared the Nepabunna block an Aboriginal Reserve, thus accepting responsibility to resource its development. Mr Thomas is eager that the terms of his original gift to the UAM stand: that the block be run by the UAM or else resumed into his own lease. Whichever way he looked at this semantic debate, it seemed that Sam and Walter's deal to have the land for the community in return for fencing it, had been long forgotten. After all, it had never been written down.

The sour taste of guilt is in Jim's mouth. He has not been able to deliver a home to these people. Not even an adequate well. He has tried to find a reason for it time and time again, testing every angle in the dark hours of the night, alive with small sounds that scuttle beyond his vision, like his own thoughts. As far as he can see, it comes back to one thing. Left to their own ways, these people would be a lot better off. He had that reluctant opinion confirmed again in the past week, when the men had come for him, too, and taken him beyond the camp to where the ceremonies were being held, in the hills, out of sight. He had listened, and watched, of course, like they had known he would, and they explained each step to him. He did not take part, but felt a part of it, making boys into men, building a culture and a community. So how does he tell them he's leaving?

It had been Violet Turner's idea when she came up to see the well. What about deputation work again, so he could appeal for support for what they were trying to achieve at Nepabunna? Fred could look after things, and young Reg Williams was champing at the bit for a placement, and he knew about sinking wells. And he had laboured hard, opening up the mission. It made sense, even while he felt her loss of faith in him behind the words. Perhaps deputation would achieve more for these people than giving them comforting words in an airless church and a trickle of water afterwards for their thirst. Jim had said: yes.

Jim had liked Reg Williams from the start. The nuggety young man with a swagger and a family game for anything arrived with all the energy Jim felt he had lost. The first night he and Reg sat up late in Jim's tent comparing notes on their camel trips with Will Wade in great detail, laughing together at the man who was their mentor and *tor*-mentor, they both said.⁷⁴

Did he tell you that one –

'I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown' -

Of course-

And Will hadn't even thought to pack a light-

Didn't need one, 'He put his hand into the hand of God', they both chimed.

Reg was full of plans already: he'd move his base to Italowie Gorge, where he knew a natural spring, and have old Dollar Mick lend a hand to get a leather working workshop going with the men. Boots, belts and saddles: they could make a killing. Jim had smiled tiredly at the young man, and wished him luck...and God's blessing. For Reg's part, he had summed up the man quickly, and would write in his first report:

'He is a most lovable man, and has endeared himself to the people.'⁷⁵

Jim pulls out his writing things, and pauses for a moment while he considers the prettily finished pad of writing paper, or the coarser paper he wrote his reports on. This time he chooses the coarser paper, and begins, what he determines will be his final article for the *Messenger* from Nepabunna. He owes the people that much.

“Sowing beside all waters”

Where the natives have had their old tribal life broken up by contact with white civilisation, the old order of tribal law and ceremony with its weird corroborees has given place generally to the even more degrading and debasing vices of the whites.

On some mission stations these problems are complex, the inherent desire to cleave to the old customs and superstitions being coupled with the additional vices of drink, gambling and immorality.

Here at Nepabunna we had our first experience of the natives gathering for the ceremony of initiation. This ceremony, and another known as the ‘Second Rule,’ are the only two perpetuated here. The performance is greatly modified in comparison with that of the wilder natives. The preparations for it provided for interesting conversations with the men, and opened a way for me to bring a spiritual application to show the futility of these customs. They put forth reasons which, when considered from their standpoint, are logical and do carry weight. They contend that it is a law recognised among all the tribes as the passing of a boy into the state of manhood. The men told me that when they make the boy pass through the first stage to manhood he is given advice and counsel by the old men as to camp life, his relationship and conduct to the women, also his respect due to the old men.

This was all very good, but I thought of Romans 7 – it speaks volumes for the wise laws which governed the tribal life of the old aborigines.

From my observation of the natives in the Mann, Musgrave Ranges, I could see that these laws were being kept, otherwise the result would have been disastrous.

The wild native is not dying out, he is being exterminated by direct or indirect means. Ill-treatment and injustice are some of the causes for the appalling decrease of the native population since the advent of the white man. The native tribal laws were good, wise and resulted in a very high order of social and moral civilisation, but the people have been interfered with by the whites, and forced into inhospitable desert country, as new country has been appropriated by the whites.

I told these men in course of conversation that all their laws were very good, but only if they are used lawfully (1 Tim. 1:8). I pointed out to them that during the time we missionaries have been among them, we have seen them break these laws again and again. The young men say they know as much as the old men. Instead of waiting for the tribal

wife to be given, they take the girl they choose, and in many other ways they break the laws of the camp.

I said, “This shows that while the law is good, we need some power to keep it.” Then I continued to point out the fact that we have all broken the law of God and have incurred His righteous wrath and indignation. Jesus Christ alone kept that law and did always those things that pleased the Father God, and because of that, God can accept us when we come as sinners, lawbreakers, in the name of Christ.

Some time ago some of these men expressed a desire to give up these old customs, but until all agree to their discontinuance they will continue. However, we praise God that He is being glorified by the triumph of the Gospel here, and we call for prayer for yet greater victories in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

- James Page, Missionary, Nepabunna⁷⁶

Jim folds his report and seals it ready for the mail truck in the morning. But he does not put away his writing things, not yet. Reaching for the other writing pad, his shoulders drop a little and his posture softens, as he begins another letter. This time he will tell her that he is leaving Nepabunna, and describe for her a life of adventure and purpose on the deputation trail.

‘May it be so, Amen’ he thinks to himself.

Maynards Well station, Flinders Ranges, 2007

I trace Jim’s deputation journey’s through the photocopies of the Messenger magazine I have brought with me on my own trek from Alice Springs to the Flinders Ranges. I have left my home, my church, my friends, my ex-husband and even my children to spend the weeks before Christmas writing this story where I can feel the heat and hear the wind of the Flinders like Mrs Forbes would have in 1932. But not Jim.

Jim Page the Federal Deputationist motors through states and conferences and conventions, showing crowds large and small his collection of glass lantern slides that tug at the heartstrings and show the hope for conversion...if only more good folk would send their prayers and money to the UAM.⁷⁷ Along the way he must hear the national debates about the need for a ‘central reserve’ where the ‘dying race’ of Aborigines can be ‘protected from

the depredations of whites,' being advocated for by the Aborigines Friend's Association and others. Now on the national stage, Jim could believe himself part of a wider movement, and become evangelical once more. Christmas will come and go: by March 1933 he is showing his slides to the UAM Annual Conference in Sydney, and the national papers lap it up.⁷⁸ Rod Schenck also speaks at the conference, about 'God's victories' at the settled mission he has established at Mt Margaret in Western Australia, where he educates children with his innovative system, and breaks down marriage customs and initiation camps for the adults, and keeps them all safe in their compound and away from the bad effects of 'white men.' Rod's address is reproduced in *The Messenger*.⁷⁹ I wonder if Jim heard the whisper of the debates that would be closer to home.

Nepabunna 1932

Rebecca has seen his type before, white fellas knocking about stations in love with the romance and sweat of it all. That was Reg Williams, and she knew that he had seen her and measured her up in an instant, too. He was polite, and called her 'Ma'am', and she knew he wouldn't interfere. Thelma, his wife, was too preoccupied with her own battle against Sandy Blight to give her any grief either, although she had that nursy way about her. When the chores are done and the breeze cools the sweat on the back of her neck, Mrs Forbes walks to the top of the small rise behind her hut and watches the activity of the mission. The wind takes away any voices, but she has learnt to read the small figures moving with purpose against the ancient brown landscape of hills. She is still as a rock.

Reg squats in the shade cast by his pine log hut as he always does to read his mail, and smoke. Letters, and copies of letters, are shuffled from one hand to another, turning oblique circles with their square pages and in his mind. No one was fooled by Fred Eaton's well, least of all Reg or the Nepabunna community, and not the Chief Protector either, it seems. When the Chief Protector's Advisory Council of Aborigines recommends that the land be leased to the UAM until they are able to demonstrate its suitability as a Reserve if and when suitable water is found, Chief Protector McLean balks at even this measure.

'I would suggest that instead of a lease the United Aborigines' Mission be granted an Annual Licence to occupy this piece of country for the purpose of carrying on missionary and welfare work amongst the aboriginals...[this] would have the advantage of coming up for revision each year and being easily terminated should their occupancy prove not desirable to the government.'⁸⁰

Reg reads the outraged responses from UAM headquarters, and wonders what Fred will write when he gets back to the Mission.

Rebecca sees Ted Coulthard knock on the Williams pine hut door in the late afternoon when the missionary is back from another days toil at the well buried over the hills. *He has waited until the Eaton's have gone south*, she notices to herself with a smile, and watches him hold out the piece of paper she had prepared for him, and sees Reg take it and turn out of the wind to light his tobacco. They disappear around the side of the building, and Rebecca lets curiosity fall away with the falling light and returns to her own hut. She knows most of the camp has signed the petition, arguing against the slow well Fred Eaton has dug out in the hills, where none can get a car or a cart to, and where none want to live, so far from the road where the goods and gossip they rely upon are found.⁸¹

Rebecca sees the dust rising from the car that brings the Eaton's home, and walks to the top of the rise to watch them arrive, even though the airless sun is baking the land in a final hurrah to summer. She sees Reg greet him, and the two men stand close for minutes. Fred's shoulders sag. But the smaller man is all energy and gesticulation, more or less pointing in the direction of the well they once started by the water hole. She knew he was waiting for permission to open it up again, just a few yards away from the earlier effort. After all, Reg was a well sinker, he should know, and the men were willing to work with him. Mr Eaton shrugs, and Reg helps him unload.

Mrs Forbes is at the mission hut on ration day, having her fill of flour and news, when Harold Hele, working for his uncle at Balcanoona, pulls up, tips his hat in her general direction, and walks up to the front of the queue to speak to Mr Eaton. Those lining up drop back, and begin to listen. It's those donkeys, of course, and a few glances are shot in Winnie's direction and she pushes out her lip and looks at the ground. Reg, a friend of Harold, joins the conversation.

'Can't do it without fences, man.' Reg says. Hele takes his hat off to shoo the flies, and repositions it low on his brow.

'It's nearly two years. Uncle Roy's getting toey. You got that well sorted yet?' He addresses the last question to Reg alone.

'Fellas reckon we work on Chinese spring again, by the creek. I got a hammer and chisel, but if you could get me some dynamite I could get a fair way further.'⁸² Government won't give us anything, that right Fred?' Reg throws a smile to keep Fred in the conversation.

'Fred's put it to them pretty strongly – dynamite, extra rations for the workers, fencing gear.

They won't come at any of it until they know we've got water. Figure that out. Can't put it more plainly than that, right Fred?' Fred's face is set watching the younger man doing the talking, but he takes the opportunity Reg gives him, and picks up the conversation. Reg lights a smoke, and steps back from the two men.

'Look, it's the same thing Mr Page said months ago. The water we've got only just does the people. Stock have got to go to Ookabulina. If we could just have that in the mission block, trouble would be over. What'd you say? Could you put a word in for us?' Hele is non-committal, tracing a pattern in some spilled flour with his boot.

'Could shepherd them,' he says quietly, not sure it is a question, and glancing up at Reg. Reg coughs on his smoke.

'One hundred and fifty thirsty donkeys? Look, see what you can find out,' Reg says. 'Make a hell of a lot of difference.'

Fred looks at him sharply.

'Make a lot of difference,' Reg corrects himself.

'I'll give it a go, mate,' and Harold slaps Reg's shoulder fondly. 'Meantime you get your mission to write to Government and pull themselves into gear. Said they'd pay for that fence, water or no. Ragless told Mr Page what was needed. What are they waiting for?'

'Water,' Fred and Reg say together.

Rebecca sees the procession of Reverends who roll their trusty Dodge's to a halt by the kerosene-clad church, spraying fine dust into the crevices that have opened up between the shingles. There is Reverend Sexton, from the Aborigines Friends Society, and more importantly, Secretary of the Advisory Council of Aborigines. After some time in the Eaton's hut, he emerges and stands in the sunshine speaking with the older men who have come as a

delegation to address him. She can see him pull a notebook from his pocket and lick his pencil, alternately looking at the men and at the notes he is taking. Then he comes looking for her, but she has seen his intention first and waits down the creek until he is gone. Later she reads of his visit in *The Advertiser*, cutting out the column 'Aborigines and Meat Rations' and pinning it to her wall. Her eyes crease at the corners as she does so, recalling the angst his anonymous report created for the missionaries. Of course it was all true: 176 people living in bough shanties on only government rations, little water or clothing, no meat rations, not even on an Aboriginal reserve, and only with camping rights.⁸³ It didn't say much for two years of mission work, and Rebecca didn't need to read it to know how disappointed she and the rest of the camp were. It wasn't that the missionaries hadn't tried, just that they had so underestimated the task. Even Mr Page, God Bless him, wherever he was now. But the UAM didn't like their failures being broadcast in the papers, oh no! Even Rebecca had taken pity on them then, and for once made a point of encouraging Mrs Eaton, when she looked so dispirited dragging herself about the camp. Later Mrs Eaton gave her a copy of the Circular prepared to explain and defend the Mission, and she was surprised to see her own words included in it:

'We had a visit from one of the camp women which did indeed cheer us up. She was telling us what a vast difference the Gospel has made in the lives of the people, how that before we came here there was such a lot of cursing and swearing amongst the people, and how they have confessed the difference in their lives. She said that her two boys pray both night and morning, and told of the effect prayer has on others of the camp. One native said to her some time ago, 'I don't think there is any place only the devil for me,' and the same man really believes in prayer now. One day he lost his donkeys and he asked the Lord to help him find them. Just as he was going out to look for them they walked into the camp, and so it was proved to him that prayer changes things.'⁸⁴

Rebecca had read that bit out to Ted, and they had both had a laugh. She didn't read him the description of the camp at *Minerawuta*, and winced a little herself at how poorly the

missionaries must have thought of them then. She still missed the old life with Jack, and catching a lump rising in her throat, and stifles it.

Rebecca sees the Reverend John Flynn, and Reverend Patterson, along with a neat woman around her own age, extract themselves from a mess of gear and contraptions that covered their car.⁸⁵ She has heard of the Reverend Patterson, the Padre from Beltana, who shares the table of station managers wherever he goes. He does not often call in at the Mission, although she knows the missionaries break their journeys south at his small cottage at Beltana. As for Flynn, she has heard the stories from well before she arrived in this country. Whether it happened or not she doesn't know, but the women have told her how Reverend Flynn would not stop to help a sick *yura* calling for assistance. And she had never known him or his AIM to offer any help to the camps. They do not stay long now: the party is ready to leave, with Reg and Mr Eaton climbing onto the car as well. Flynn has his camera bag on his lap. The images he seeks lie beyond the mission, it seems.⁸⁶

Rebecca sees the mail truck pull up the day a slim woman with a swag and satchels dismounts along with the usual parcels. She sees her shade her eyes and peer towards the hill where Rebecca can now barely be seen standing below the brow of the hill. The children reach her first.

'Your sister is here! Mailman tell us. Come on!' They pull her along the track and she is compelled by their insistence before she has time to think.

'Who is it?'

'Your sister!'

'What name?'

‘Come on, Mrs Forbes!’

She is patting down her dress and tucking wisps of hair under her hat, suddenly feeling the dried sweat on her face and wishing she had a hand basin. The slim figure is close now, holding out her hand, and Rebecca tries to take quick glances at the face in shadow beneath the generous hat. It could be. Any one of them could have travelled, like she did, like Robert did.

‘Ernestine Hill, pleased to meet you. I’ve been hearing about you in Copley. I am collecting stories for a book, and was told that your story is certainly worth including.’ The woman with the refined accents smiles broadly at her. Rebecca looks at the children who are clustered around the two women, full of curiosity, and is about to say something to them, but changes her mind. She fixes her eye on the mailman’s back as he unloads his truck instead, and eventually pulls her gaze back to the woman in front of her, waiting. She is not her sister.

‘My name is Mrs Forbes. I read a fair bit. You’re a writer, you say. What have you written?’ Rebecca lets the woman give her answer, holding her silence so the woman must say more than she intended. Finally she has heard enough, and smiles at the women.

‘Well, Miss Hill, I can tell you something of my life if you have time,’ and Rebecca looks meaningfully at the mail truck.

‘Oh, he said he could pick me up on Sunday morning, if I don’t mind staying a few days. I have my things with me. And it’s Mrs Hill. My husband died.’⁸⁷ Rebecca looks into the taller woman’s still young face and sees the traces of sorrow she recognises. She nods.

‘Come down to my camp when you’re ready then. The children will show you where it is. I’ll put the billy on, Mrs Hill.’

Hawker, 2001

I had been told by a fellow who said he had it from RM Williams that most of the interview Ernestine Hill wrote about Mrs Forbes in *The Great Australian Loneliness* was made up, because Rebecca wouldn't see her.⁸⁸ RM Williams corroborated the story:

'I was very angry with Ernestine Hill, because she pretended to be Rebecca's sister. Told Mert Lewis she was. Usually when anyone came through, Rebecca would go bush. She was only dirt.'⁸⁹

But the more I researched her story, the more Hill's account was borne out, more or less. She must have had her facts from somewhere. RM's own account, in *I Once Met a Man*, is by contrast full of inaccuracies, including calling her Jeanie instead of Rebecca.⁹⁰ Yet he too tries to fathom Rebecca's life with a mixture of disgust and admiration:

'...She chose to stay with her husband's people, those of her children's colour - her chosen place (she had no other). Intensely private, this English girl had no secret place - no toilet, no bathroom, no towels or soap - the poorest, loneliest woman on earth, charity unwanted and rejected. The two boys grew up belonging in the tribe and it seemed that Jean was content: the tribe became her people...Watching the pathetic figure of the tiny sunburnt woman carrying water from the common well, I used to wonder at the spirit so grand, so much bigger and heroic than any other, and could not help feeling pity until I learned that pity is an unnecessary word. Better to see the drama of Jeanie as creation at its best - hammering, shaping, melting humanity into something worthy of life.'⁹¹

Years later he could tell me:

'Rebecca thought she was just nothing, which is a terrible attitude, but she was right. Everyone treated her as dirt, right on the outer, as a 'bad white'. Mrs Forbes had friends, but no one close. She was very lonely. She stayed, she *committed herself to that*, and it was a great sacrifice.'⁹²

As far as I knew, these two authors were the only ones to try to capture Rebecca's life in text, apart from an unknown writer in Western NSW in the late thirties, who makes a bad attempt at a précis of Hill's account.⁹³ So, with RM's cautions in my mind, and with the hopeless

romanticism of them both sounding a warning, I turned to Hill's biographies, hoping to glimpse Rebecca's soul myself.

**photo of article

Hill calls Rebecca 'The most astounding human document in the annals of the outback' and 'let[s] her tell her story herself' and begins the monologue with 'Life's a lottery' as she recounts her tale, including a wistful aside 'I am afraid my book will never be written. I have become lazy and contented like my husband's people' and concludes:

'I don't worry. The path has led into strange places, but I have no regrets. If, as they say, a wife always takes her husband's nationality, I am an Australian, actually the only real white Australian there is.'⁹⁴

I wish I could produce the whole account for you. But perhaps I already have.

Flinders University, Adelaide, 2002

The first attempt I made at writing Rebecca's life was in a conference paper titled "'White Woman Lives as a Lubra in Native Camp": representations and memories of 'sharing space'" for the InASA conference in 2002. My argument was simple: Rebecca was an ordinary woman living in an unexpected context. In fact I concluded the piece with my own evangelical flourish:

If this ordinary Rebecca can make choices to share her domestic life with Indigenous people and communities and to allow a synthesis of cultural practices and beliefs to occur through the experience, then so can we all.⁹⁵

And this was truly my hope.

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Life Writing Chapter Sixteen

Jim returns to Nepabunna

Adelaide, 1933

The media interest in Jim's ideas continued: his South Australian deputation now included advocating for training centres for half caste women 'to fit half-caste women for taking their place in the communal life'.⁹⁶ Other Christian voices also made the news, with Reverend Sexton, Reverend Needham, the National Missionary Council all making calls for 'sanctuaries' for 'blacks', as a contraception against the 'depredations' of white men.⁹⁷ The idea of a central reserve at the heart of the nation was carving out the new frontier in race politics.⁹⁸ Would the same logic hold for Nepabunna?

Chief Protector McLean, an efficient administrator but somewhat lacking in vision, allows himself a small smile along with his habitual grimace as yet more correspondence regarding the Nepabunna case lands in his in-tray. Whether or no their industrial enterprises were proceeding – and he had heard they were now selling boots, boomerangs and guano of all things!⁹⁹ – the lack of sufficient water continued to strangle their operations from his point of view. At least this new missionary, Mr Williams, had a reputation for well sinking, so perhaps at last they might get somewhere, or be advised to give up.

At times it was hard to keep up with these missionaries: The Wade's had gone to Swan Reach, it seemed, the Eatons replacing them at Oodnadatta, leaving the Williamses in charge

at Nepabunna. The Chief Protector, of course, continued to deal with correspondence from them all. They were quite a literary lot. But this Williams was a bushman too, and he appeared to know what he was doing.

He had, for instance, opened up a well making 5000 gallons per day at only ten feet, and only five yards away from one of the sites they had given up on last year. And McLean is sure Williams is behind the renewed push from the UAM for the parcel of land to be declared an Aboriginal Reserve, under their own direction. Even Williams' innocent request for twice the length of fencing materials originally quoted - 'Trusting this mistake of mine will not greatly inconvenience the Dept,' was met without qualm when Williams explained that the rugged country with its ups and downs had made estimations of actual fencing distance difficult.¹⁰⁰ McLean even granted the request for extra rations for the fencers: just why he said yes to Williams when he had always said no to Eaton, not even McLean was sure. Even the Pastoral Board were supportive of the declaration of the Reserve.¹⁰¹ It was uncanny. Confidence in the mission seemed to have suddenly soared.

Iga Warta, December 2007

I have mentioned casually to Vince Coulthard that RM Williams seemed able to get supplies from the department with unnerving ease. I give the example of the extra fencing material. A wide smile spreads across Vince's face.

'I rode that boundary fence when I was a kid, on a donkey. I'd be riding along and suddenly: it would take off at right angles for a bit, then turn again. Zig-zagging all along that country, and I wondered why. You know why they needed that extra fencing material? It wasn't the up and down, it was the zig-zagging! Old Sam and grandfather Walter knew what they were doing. By moving the fence over, little bit and then a bit more, they got to include a spring and some good ground in that Nepabunna block. That's why the estimate was so far out!!'¹⁰²

Nepabunna June 1933

Rebecca watches her younger friend from her accustomed position in the middle rows of seating in the church. Winnie, holding the infant Evelyn and flanked by her other children, is sitting quiet in the front row, watching the small movements in the bag walls while Mr Williams gives the funeral address for her father, Sydney Ryan. Winnie is swaddled in white, as are her children, even to the starch white of the mob caps made for the occasion. Mr Williams has made much reminding them all of old Annie's wishes, that 'You no cry along me, I go alonga the Father.' Now that Annie's old *artu* has also passed away, Winnie mourns her father in silence too. But the tears continue to seep along the folds of her broad face.

Rebecca struggles to hold her own tears inside her tight rib cage, and clutches the handkerchief she has brought for the purpose. While Mr Williams speaks in grand tones of Sydney Ryan's life of vengeance and warfare, Rebecca is remembering the pannikins of tea Sydney handed her and Jack when they first arrived, there on the banks of the Angepena creek. She recalls the softness of Annie's hug, surrounding her own small frame, and the broad smile Sydney permitted himself as he sized up the white woman Jack was proudly showing off. *At least he made it this far, she thinks, he made it to Nepabunna.* Which was more than Annie or her Jack had managed, and the tears begin to flow now, although she soaks them up straight away with the soft cotton square she holds.

'...To the surprise of his sons and companions, Sydney found peace and forgiveness and a changed life in his last days. After a life of hatred, bitterness and revenge, the old man heard of the Man of Sorrows, Who came not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.'¹⁰³

Mr Williams voice has lost its ringing tones, and instead has become almost conversational, close and intimate. He leads them in a song, one of the new ones that the people have not quite learnt yet, although they join in the chorus:

‘When at last I reach the shore
And the fearful breakers roar
Twixt me and the peaceful rest.
Then while leaning on thy breast
May I hear thee say to me
Fear not I will Pilot thee.’¹⁰⁴

As the sorry strains die away, Mr Williams takes some moments to look over the congregation, who are mostly women. He knows the men are in the gully, preparing to bury the old *wileryu, yura-way*.

‘Go in peace’ Reg intones, ‘the old man is with his Almighty Father.’

The Williams’ have been a breath of fresh air to the community. Rebecca has watched the comings and goings increase from a crawl to a jog to a sprint, and now the place was barely ever still. Men carting guano from the mines, and a knot of young fellas always around the leather workshop. The fencing team was in and out of camp, picking up their extra rations and getting back to the job. The older men kept on with carving boomerangs, and Mr Williams was always off to Copley or Beltana, chasing orders or supplies. It was all paid for, the work, the materials, everything. Mr Williams even pinned up notices on his cottage, showing the wages, the costs, how much the goods were selling for. The men could earn more at the mission and staying with their families than getting not much more than rations on the stations.¹⁰⁵ And Mrs Williams was the same: every morning from eight o’clock until dinner time past noon she taught school, with her toddler in tow. She even talked the

education department into sending up some desks and old primers, even if they still refused slates. When Mrs Eaton left, Mrs Williams picked up the baking as well, and kept house in that little cottage for themselves and those three big boys sent up from Colebrook Home at Quorn. Quite a job, even with the girl Ruth to help. No wonder they needed to build on those extra rooms. Plus the prayer meetings, church services, and visiting between them both. And now Mrs Williams wants a hospital as well. Rebecca admires them, this enthusiastic pair, even as she shrinks from them. She busies herself with keeping her wood pile up, and passes the cold winter days inside by her stove, reading her books, and cooking for Ray.

The United Aborigines Messenger. August 1, 1933

A PRAYER MEETING AT NEPABUNNA

Have you ever been in a real live prayer meeting?

To some it means a chorus of loud “Amens” and “Hallelujahs,” and to others the solemn quietness where reverent faith awaits expectantly; to all, one God, one Faith. The Nepabunna boys, greyheads and otherwise, met together for a prayer meeting. Their case was desperate and they were very noisy, but sincere, as their problems were laid before God.

“Yes, yes,” “That’s it,” “We do”; everybody that could find a voice grunted something in acclamation.

They asked for work, and for a school, and for a hospital, for the boys and girls, that they might not grow up graceless and hopeless. They were good prayers, and by every promise of God I shall say they shall have their desire.

To-day there is not an able-bodied man out of work, and we could place more men if they were eligible.

The roof for the church and hospital has been supplied.

Thank God. I have never seen faith disappointed. Have you? – R. Williams.¹⁰⁶

Jim reads the latest *Messenger* casually, as he waits for the attendant to fill the fuel tank of ‘the latest UAM acquisition’, a ‘deputation car’.¹⁰⁷ He is enjoying it immensely, and it has made his country itinerary both busier and more relaxing. No more awkward stopovers with forced or reluctant hosts: he can convey himself to his preferred lodgings, and stop where he

chooses on the way. And there are preferred lodgings too, like those dear friends at Peterborough. He imagines the look on their faces when they see his car, and smiles to himself. He knows he will be in demand for car rides, and looks forward to it, despite Violet's stern reminder that the car is for deputation work only. He won't go far, he reasons.

As always, he has turned to news of Nepabunna first. He will read the whole magazine from front to back later – he needs to keep abreast of developments for his work. He is amazed how quickly Thelma has got her hospital, but then, Reg's description of the prayer meeting gives the answer. The mission is actually giving the men work, and wages, in a Depression! You had to hand it to him: and Jim feels a pang of guilt again. Still, he had tried. It was all in God's good time.

He pays the attendant with the Federal UAM order book, and starts the engine, peering at the instruments as their needles jump. He wouldn't mind visiting Nepabunna soon. Perhaps after this round of engagements. He could probably do with some fresh stories and slides for his lectures, and besides, he would appreciate the opportunity to chew over a particular concern that had been gnawing at him with Reg. He had drafted a piece for *The Messenger* himself. As he saw it, while the UAM established their mission stations around the country, the itinerating mission that had been their beginning was being forgotten. In simple math, of the '70000 Aboriginals' the front page of *The Messenger* declared the UAM committed to reach, the stations could only counter 20000. 50000 were still 'untouched'. 'A Big Task' alright, as he had titled his article, and gone on to remind the readers that a traditional way of life has afforded 'a [wise] system of tribal government, otherwise they would never have survived in such a country... ' and that

Western civilisation is not quite the same thing as Christianity. To make a native wear pants, sit at a table, eating a three course meal, does not necessarily indicate the possession

of Christianity; it may be the outcome of it, but it is not identical with it. Our Lord and Saviour commissioned his disciples to go and preach the Gospel. No mention was made of education or civilisation, though of course, that may be inculcated, but we need to realise that the Lord by His Holy Spirit is able to take the Word of God, the Gospel message, and work upon the wild native in the bush, and the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to him.’¹⁰⁸

Jim knows this will be controversial. But Reg had known both, as he had himself. *I’ll go and have a yarn*, Jim decides.

Nepabunna, September 1933

Mrs Forbes seems smaller than Jim remembers her, standing beside her youngest son who has grown considerably in the eighteen months since he saw him last.

‘Still practicing that Lord’s Prayer?’ Jim quips, and gets a faint nod in reply before Raymond slouches around the corner of the hut, and is gone. But Mrs Forbes is smiling.

‘Come and have a cuppa and a lump o’ cake,’ she offers, holding the door open. Jim is not yet re-accustomed to the smell, and has to remember to breathe through his mouth. He sits down on the crate by the table, as the older woman fusses with the hissing kettle hanging over her small range. She serves the square of dry cake on an enamel platter, and the steaming brew is presented in a white enamel cup with a small pink rose on it. Jim is flattered by her affection.

‘Wondered when we might see you again,’ opens Mrs Forbes, and she is positively beaming. Jim feels overwhelmed.

‘Read about you in the papers, of course. Did you read that story about me? Think it was going to be in the Sydney papers, she said.’ Jim tries to shake his head politely, and Mrs Forbes seems a little disappointed, but continues. ‘So what has brought you back?’

It's a good question. She narrows her eyes as she watches him consider his answer. He looks so soft, she thinks. She has become accustomed to the stubble and dust that seem to hang about Mr Williams, any time of day.

'Oh, a little rest I suppose.' He is surprised at his answer. 'I mean, I had heard about all the things happening here, and wanted to come and see for myself. In my line of work I need to stay up with what's happening, and folk are always pleased to hear good news.' The truth, as he expected, did not quite live up to its press, but nevertheless, the station was in good shape.

'It's been a good time,' Mrs Forbes agrees with him, sipping her tea. 'They've not had it easy, you know, the Williamses. Sandy blight, poor dears, must be a worry to them. And they work hard, running here and there. They'll blow themselves out, that pair.' Jim notices that Mrs Forbes says this fondly, and he wonders at the change in her.

'How have you been getting on then?' Jim asks. Rebecca knew that question would come. She has already decided to nurse her grief privately, embracing it silently each morning when she wakes alone on her narrow cot.

'Fair enough. They look after me, you know. Boys help me with water, and the girls come and get me for washing. Young Jack – he's with the men now – he brings me a roo tail now and then, and often there's a rabbit left at my door in the morning. They haven't forgotten me.'

Jim had wondered. There were fewer camps around Mrs Forbes hut now, with most dismantled or abandoned for the sturdier structures springing up closer to the missionaries houses on the flat. But he says nothing. She seems content.

'Here, come and I'll show you my goats,' Mrs Forbes takes his empty cup and stands up. They spend the next little while in the spring sunshine, as Mrs Forbes relays endless details of

her troubles with her goats. All the while she is watching him, waiting for that moment he will shrug off the city reserve that hold his back so straight, and rest on one leg with his hand on his hip like he used to. Finally it comes, when he laughs at her story of Ray's efforts to shepherd the goats away from Mr Williams new well, given their propensity for falling down them, at least when Mr Eaton used to be working them. She lets him laugh long, and then asks, 'So how has it been, travelling all over the countryside, Mr Page?' Jim's face is still creased into its smile lines, and he answers,

'Ah, it's grand to be on the road, Mrs Forbes. I like that bit. And people always like to see a picture show, and I do believe they are hearing the message too. But I miss these hills, Mrs Forbes. I even miss the goats, which is more than I ever thought I would!' He has shrugged off his jacket while he speaks, and slung it over his shoulder. He is squinting into the afternoon sun, soon to lose itself behind the hills.

'Well you're as likely to get more of the goats tonight Mr Page, served up on your dinner plate if I know Mrs Williams! I'm boiling up a piece too for my Ray tonight, and better get back to it. Rabbits no good just now: they all have that bung eye, and all diseased inside. Dying in their burrows. Thank goodness for the goats. Could you just bring up that branch with you as you come?' and she indicates a dry branch by Jim's feet. 'Got to look to the woodpile.' As they walk back towards Mrs Forbes hut, Jim is considering the programme Reg has suggested for him tomorrow.

'They don't use the goat hide for the boots too, do they Mrs Forbes?' he asks thoughtfully. She allows herself a smile, remembering his first days at Minerawuta.

'You don't know much about boots, do you Mr Page? Never mind, Mr Williams will teach you all about it. See if you can't walk in your own shoes by the time you leave.'

They parted at her door, Jim swinging his way back towards the mission houses, humming 'There's a land that is fairer than day' under his breath.



Photograph taken by Tracy Spencer at Iga Warta Display

Maynard's Well December 2007

There is little reference to missionary work in RM Williams autobiographical books, although he does describe setting up his first workshop at Italowie Gap, and working together with Dollar Mick to develop a leather boot for stockmen.¹⁰⁹ The way I'd always heard it, from people in the district, was that Nepabunna could have been the hub of a multi-million

dollar stockman's outfitter business, had the mission allowed RM Williams to remain there.

When I spoke with RM, I deliberately chose not to pry into this sensitive area, hearing the hurt still present in his brief gloss:

'Mission people kicked me out, thought I was a heathen, thought I should be praying all the time. The message that Christ gave to the world was that charity and good will are some of the main things... and to tell the truth, God is a spirit. I was very bitter about being kicked out. They got their heads together and decided I was heathen.'¹¹⁰

Other accounts claim 'He later moved because the missionaries felt that proceeds from his business should go to the church.'¹¹¹

The May 1934 *Messenger* would merely report that

'As mentioned last month, Mrs Williams and the children have had to return to Adelaide through ill health, following on a time of strain at Nepabunna. It has been found that the condition of all three will necessitate a longer absence from their work than was at first thought, as the children are both suffering from eye trouble. Mr Page, who had started out for deputation work in Victoria, was sent for in haste to help Mr Williams, but when he arrived at the station in the 'Flinders,' our brother Williams was obliged to leave him alone, that he might come to the city to take care of his family. It is quite evident that a long rest is needed.'¹¹²

I read between the lines, wondering about the small and poisonous barbs that brought down these energetic and committed workers. My own church may be doing that to me as I write, a culmination of disapproving frowns and pursed lips while I have feverishly worked to turn their vision into something real. They are 'reviewing their ministry needs', and I can only wait, out of communication, for the outcome. Churches, like political organisations the world over, are like that. Perhaps that's why Jesus never joined one.

For the Williamses, I think the strain was there to be seen in their increasingly dissatisfied reports to the *Messenger*: the poverty of the 'faith mission', the lack of capital for the next phase of enterprise. The SA Council of the UAM dutifully adds each need to their prayer

request list, while the Williams's see the momentum of their initiatives drain away with the effort each day.

Then Thelma is nearly beside herself as the Christmas season of ceremony attempts to overtake the camp, and the heat becomes oppressive in the four room home that houses her 'family' of ten.¹¹³ Thelma assumes the initiation ceremonies did not go ahead, and affirms the 'young folk' of the mission who 'refuse to submit to the tyranny.'¹¹⁴ But they both begin to feel the entrenched opposition towards them from the 'old men.' Their articles to *The Messenger* describe a community beginning to fracture along generational lines, undermining the mainstay of social order, the initiation of boys into men.

Nepabunna, April 1934

Jim is sitting by the new stove recently installed for the Williams in one of the new stone rooms added to the missionary quarters at Nepabunna. It is dark outside, and he is late preparing his evening meal. It is not much, only tinned meat to go with the heavy damper Mrs Forbes brought for him. Thelma's baking trays are gritty with dust now, and Jim wonders idly who would come forward this time as his saviour with digestible bread.

In truth, he is appalled. Leaving his car at the Adelaide railway station, he had taken the familiar train trip to Copley, intent on a two week mercy mission to support his friend Reg, before he could return to his itinerating. Reg looked terrible when he arrived, and it was all Jim could do to sit and hold his tongue while the exhausted man poured out his anger and disappointment and bile. If anything, it was Reg's own success that had made Reg such a target amongst an organisation primed for failure and self righteous in their poverty. Jim had ventured one question - What about the spiritual work? – and Reg had reminded him in no

uncertain terms of his own argument, that God can be trusted to work His own salvation in the people's souls, whatever their state of sin or otherwise. What God could not do was get the people jobs.

There was no money left in the mission store, the last having sent Thelma and the children by train to Adelaide, and Jim had set off with nothing but his fare either. Reg left on foot, carrying scant belongings, not even taking his leatherworking tools with him. 'They'll need them. That's a business that can get ahead. See that the orders in Copley are filled.' There was no personal rancour between them, only shock and the sooty taste of spoiled dreams.

Although he does not feel it, Jim calls on the diplomacy he has cultivated in countless Christian gatherings, and writes what he must for *The Messenger*.

"My arrival here was indeed a cheer to the heart of Mr Williams. Truly, as iron sharpeneth iron, so does the countenance of a man his friend. Quite a number of the men are away working, those in the camp are busy with big orders for boomerangs. The industrial work is on a sound footing, and a growing concern. Nepabunna is quite prosperous now in comparison with what it has been since we started here. The need has been for someone to share the work with Mr Williams. There is inadequate accommodation for a married couple with a family. His place is far cry from what it should be, and it has taken two years to get that. The need is for a single man to help build up the station. I am sure great possibilities are ahead as we seek to work in conjunction for the glory of God. I sincerely hope that Mr and Mrs Williams will soon return here. They have done magnificently in the face of many difficulties and problems."¹¹⁵

Better than I could have he thinks. The thought has arrived before Jim can stop it, although he dismisses it quickly. There is too much to be done. The summer rains have fouled the well at the creek, and the flow was much reduced, although the waterhole itself was holding up for now. Sam and Walter had left the fencing while there was work on at the stations, but at least all the materials were to hand. He would talk to Ted in the morning about the boomerang orders, and hope that that would be one industry he could leave to others. The guano mining had come to a stop for the moment, waiting on UAM prayers to materialise the 'Nepabunna

wagon' Reg had so desperately sought. Families were not willing to wreck their own carts in continuous use over those rough tracks. Reg had suggested he speak with Rufus Wilton about the boot orders which were overdue at the Copley store.

Reg had not mentioned any of the older men, Fred McKenzie, Dick Coulthard, Henry Wilton or Fred Johnson, and Jim can only assume they are out of the camp. He would need to find out about that. He can not imagine the camp without them.

There is no one in the room to hear Jim sigh. He begins to scratch out a list...*Bible classes, school, Church, rations, clothes.* By the time he has finished, he cannot even bring himself to begin the letter he promised to write to *her*, his faithful correspondent and 'most ardent supporter' waiting eagerly for news of his 'visit' to Nepabunna half a world away from where her daffodils are blooming.

Prospect, Adelaide June 1934

Violet is struggling. She is resting on her couch, as the doctor ordered, but cannot lay her sheafs of paper aside, as he also ordered. Surely one more edition of *The Messenger* would not greatly affect her condition? Being Secretary to the UAM had been far more than a job to her, and she fancies that it actually restores her spirits, rather than vexes them. And this article from Mr Schenk is certainly too interesting to pass up, and a little editing from herself would just spruce it up a little. She bites her lip, and allows a small frown, although she knows the doctor would not approve of that either. Mr Schenk had been rather forthright in his reply to poor Mr Page. She had run Mr Page's articles as he had asked – rather poor arguments for itinerating, she thought – and somewhat fortuitously had printed the chapter on itinerating history in the UAM just last month. Even so, she found herself compelled by Mr

Schenk's arguments for the higher value of settled missions, and he should know after years of experience. She feels a pang of compassion for young Mr Page, but contents herself that his report from Nepabunna - 'Gather[ing] around the Lord's Table for the first time'! – sounds jolly enough and so perhaps a little criticism will not be too hard to bear.¹¹⁶ Besides, she did not like the inference in Jim's little prayer for her, that 'The Lord knows when to lay aside...' Indeed! She was not ready to be 'laid aside' just yet!

State Library NSW, Sydney, 2001

It is so rare to find a public argument between missionaries that I am taken aback to find the disagreement between Jim Page and Rod Schenk profiled in the pages of *The Messenger*, archived in a thick book in the vaults of the Mitchell Library Reading room. I greedily photocopy them all under the impossibly high vaulted ceiling in the sandstone heart of Sydney. It is not that there weren't vitriolic exchanges in UAM committees and behind backs, but the loyalty to a united front against the world usually overcame the desire to win the argument, in public at least.

Jim had followed up his first salvo - 'A Big Task' – with 'Settled Mission Station, Itinerary Work, or Both?' in January's edition. While he allows places like Schenk's Mt Margaret mission as 'advance stations' from which itinerating missions could be sent to the remaining 50000 'untouched' souls, he argues in detail for the cost-effectiveness, and evangelical success of itinerating over settled missions.¹¹⁷ The impact on 'tribal life' was also substantially less, he noted.

I could see that Jim's articles were scarcely veiled yearnings to return to the adventure that began his vocation: his trip with Will and Iris Wade through the Musgrave Ranges. I knew

that feeling: when I felt so full of purpose, driving around outback South Australia as a modern day ‘Flynn’s man’, a Patrol Minister for Frontier Services. With my husband and young daughter making up the team, I felt I could live out the vision of being a witness to the care Christ had for all people, just by turning up in the most out of the way places. Of course I forgot the long angst-ridden conversations about the value of it all we had as we drove, or the huge amount of energy it took to face up to stranger after stranger, establishing credibility and creating a pretext for burning all that fuel for an hour or two’s conversation. It is the simple clarity of romance that remains afterwards.

Jim’s arguments for itinerating are thin, and peter out into a crusaders call

‘...for God-sent, Spirit-filled, physically strong, young men, single for preference, willing to become unknown, yet well known; poor, yet making many rich; despised, yet approved of God; able and willing to endure hardness, constrained by the love of Christ to go and search with tireless patience for these wandering sheep; content to sow the seed which, like the grain sown in the north, may lie dormant for years till a liberal rain comes and it bursts into life; sowing in hope, knowing it is God who gives the increase.’¹¹⁸

Mr and Mrs Schenck make their reply, under the same title, in July’s *Messenger*.¹¹⁹

Schenk tackles Jim’s claims one by one: eight workers are kept at a settled mission for the cost of three itinerating; the numbers contacted by itinerating missions cannot compete with those attracted to settled missions; Christians need shepherds as well as evangelists, ongoing care and instruction not one off contacts, and a sanctuary to protect them against ‘the awful coercion of native women and the mutilation of young men among the untouched natives.’

His strongest argument, and the one that scuppers contemporary idealised notions of cultural purity was already a known fact:

‘We know also that so-called untouched natives are not “untouched”; Satan’s agents are there, and in a short time every tribe in Australia will be debauched and demoralised by white men. Only a settled station can successfully combat these men, so why should we not start with the best goal in view?’¹²⁰

It is so clear to Schenk that he, and men like him, are not the ‘debauchers and demoralisers’. The history of colonisation in Australia, I think, suggests it is not so clear after all.

Top Camp, Nepabunna, August 1934

Jim is sitting on an upturned drum by Fred McKenzie’s fire, idly shooing away unconcerned dogs as he sips at his steaming pannikin.¹²¹ He is pleased the old man has returned to the camp, even though there is little Jim can give him to do here. He can hear the steady click of blade on iron-hard mulga wood, as Ted works at the boomerang orders. Until that lot can bring in some money, they have nothing to buy leather, or sacking, or timbers, to take up any of the other industries that so recently filled this place with activity, and purpose. The mission is broke. They haven’t even been able to raise the fare to bring the assistant missionaries, Mr and Mrs Wyld up from Colebrook Home yet. And so he passes his days doing what he can, and less than that. Lately, when he’s not drinking cups of tea at any campfire with a warm billy, he is composing replies to Schenk’s article, none of which he will send. The old man opposite stirs.

‘Someone coming.’ Jim hasn’t heard a thing, but obediently turns towards the west to watch the skyline with Fred. Soon, the blue sky resolves into a pale pall of dust, and an engine thrum and skittering rocks can be heard. It isn’t mail day, and Jim is slow to get to his feet. He hasn’t finished patting the pale dirt from his clothes before the car pulls up, and Mr Roy Thomas gets out the passenger door. His nephew Harold is at the wheel, and stays by the car, rolling a smoke.

Jim's hand is dry, and dirty in the creases, as he shakes Roy's outstretched hand. He knows what this will be about.

'Jim,' hails Mr Thomas. The man in the suit nods at Fred, who is still sitting by his fire.

'Cuppa?' asks Fred.

'No, ta. Just stopping by. Jim – ' Mr Thomas is uncomfortable, looking about for a place they might talk, privately. Jim doesn't move, nor make it easy for the man. He knows this is foolish, this small point-scoring, but he does it anyway.

'Something up Roy?' Jim says it kindly, and waits.

'Aah...look, it's still those donkeys, and Ragless says there's been packs of dogs, too. That bit of fence is making no difference. They just bust through the five-wire, I said they would. I can't afford it, you can see that.' Jim looks at the man's clothes, and the car, and the neat arrangement of cargo loaded onto the tray. He didn't see it at all. He waits. 'I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to go to the Pastoral Board and ask to have this bit back in my lease. The reserve is off. This isn't what we signed up to, you know that, and I hear that even the well is going backwards now.'¹²² Mr Thomas' eyes slide to the farther hills, knowing this last to be damning the man in front of him. Jim feels a swift falling sensation in his stomach, and draws in his breath. He is about to speak but the man goes on. 'I'm not kicking you off, I'm not saying that. Just, unless you can get it back to what it was, and better, I'm going to have to review things. It's coming up four years. You can't say I haven't been fair.' And Jim couldn't. He liked the man, and knew he had been more than fair - to both the mission and the *yuras* - more than any of the others. He didn't want to lose his support now.

'I know that. I'm sorry for any inconvenience. We've had a few setbacks, as you know, and right now we're undermanned as well. I'd been hoping the Williamses would be back,

but it's hard to say, and our other man is detained at Quorn. Should be here any day. But I'll do what I can. Can't say more than that. You've always been fair to us, and we want to do the right thing by you. I'll talk to the men.'

'Preciate that. Right you are, then. I'll be up at the station for a few days. Stop in for a cuppa if you get the chance. I'm sure Mrs Ragless would like the company. We men will be all business I'm afraid, so it makes a fairly boring time for her.' Mr Thomas is beaming again, the unpleasantries over, and relieved that Jim has taken the news so well. He knows Mr Gerard in Adelaide will not be so sanguine about losing the opportunity to have the place declared a Reserve. Still, it seems the only course of action. The place was going nowhere.

Jim watches the man walk back to the car, and as if on signal, Harold opens his own door so that the two men fold into their seats simultaneously. The engine has started, but Jim still calls out 'See you Harold,' before turning back to the fire, shaking his head, and ready to ask Fred what he makes of it all. But Fred is gone.

Jim is about to walk back to the missionary's hut and begin the letter he knows he must write to Mr Gerard, when he is hailed by a loud, high voice. Nellie Driver, a little mad he suspects, is swaying towards him, followed by some of the older girls carrying drums of fresh washing.

'I finished with these girls now, Mr Page. You want them? School or something?' She giggles, and so do the girls. Jim groans. The school is a desultory affair, because of such irregular attendance, but he dare not vex Nellie now he is finally in her good books. After the last time, she even told him she had become a Christian now, and it wouldn't happen again.

¹²³ So he decides to leave the letter to Gerard a bit longer.

'Come up to the house, then, and I'll get out some paper. We were up to writing out those verses, weren't we?' He knows he is no teacher. He prays Mrs Wyld will be, when she gets

there. Still, he has taught writing before, at Oodnadatta, and for a moment recalls the joy of watching Kitty making her letters so carefully in the warm breathing dark of the shed that stood for a school there. He catches himself: he hasn't thought of her for such a long time. He is imagining just where she might be now, as he walks with the young women towards his hut. It's as if Roy's visit had never been.

Iga Warta, 2001

The matter of the lease matters a great deal to those who tell the history of this mission.¹²⁴

Cliff Coulthard was well aware of the implications the lease arrangements for Nepabunna had for Jim Page: the *yuras* felt disenfranchised on one hand, and he was expected to enforce the idealised standards of the mission on the other.

Oh yes. They put a lot of conditions on him. They took the lease of the land then. But the people worked for this land see, ...The lease should of went to the Adnyamathanha people at that stage you know ...but it went to that mission or the church organisation that he was working for, and then they put conditions on him...¹²⁵

In later years, other missionaries there would threaten the people to close down the mission if the will, and whim, of the missionaries was not carried out. Had the twenty-five square miles been declared an Aboriginal Reserve, the *yuras* would have had some rights under the government, and a right of appeal. As it was, they, and Jim, had none:

'...they put conditions on him, saying that "Oh you've got to get these people speaking English all the time, don't speak their tongue you know. You've got to tell them to stop the initiation ceremony, the tribal ways of living and the law. You've got to convince that on everything they've got to be like white people. They've got to [try to] live like white people". So Page didn't want to do that and he told the people. He said "No, I don't want to do that", and he told people like Roy Thomas too. Things were happening around Nepabunna and all the old people were talking about [it] and they said "Hey how come? This feller here, he's still arguing for us you know and he got us our promised land ... and he bought us to this promised land". Then Page was told if he didn't do that he would be then posted away.¹²⁶

Maynard's Well, December 2007

It is hard for me, so far into the story, not to dislike Mr Wyld before he even steps onto the canvas I draw of Nepabunna, 1934. I have no photograph of him, but imagine him a weasley and small man, a blustering type who seeks fame to make up for stature. I think he might be blonde, with a moustache, and that his skin is doughy and turns slightly grey when he sweats in the unaccustomed heat. I think his perspiration smells quite acrid, and that he preaches in a high pitched voice that does not travel. He is a whinger from the start.

Just eight months with the UAM, and he is already writing opinion pieces in the *Messenger* magazine.¹²⁷ He is confirmed in his course as the one who will 're-commence' the industrial work at Nepabunna, and gives no indication, then or later, that he had any interest in coming to know the *yuras* or the history of the place either. Perhaps he had already formed an opinion of Jim as well, when they dug a poor well together at Colebrook Home. Jim never was a well sinker.

Nepabunna, October 1934

Rebecca had sensed the tension between the two men from the start: the way Wyld had left Jim's outstretched hand hanging, while he had rocked back on his heels, hands on his hips, looking about him. As if he summed it all up in the moment. She knew straightaway not to expect a visit from the new missionary.

But she is not surprised when Jim comes and coughs at her slightly ajar door, the following week. She folds over the corner of her book, puts her felted hat down hard over her hair, and opens the door. He looks hot, although the day is mild.

'Mrs Forbes, can I have a word?' His face is working, and he rubs at his forehead.

‘Mr Page. I was just about to fetch me some more kindling for my fire tonight. Perhaps you can help me? We can talk as we go.’ Jim smiles immediately. She’s come to know him quite well, he thinks, and is grateful for it.

Jim is about to break one of his own personal rules, and he knows it. ‘Mrs Forbes, I’ve always got along with the other missionaries we’ve had here,’ he starts, and he knows it is true. He was not a difficult or demanding man. ‘But Mr Wyld...’

‘Mrs Wyld has not come yet?’ Rebecca cuts in. She understands the role he is asking her to play.

‘No, the mission has no money for fares yet, and besides, he says she and the children cannot possibly come until their quarters are up to scratch. Lord knows we’ve tried to make it better, but not even Reg could manage that. And frankly that’s the least of our worries. Personally I’m happy to go back into my tent, like I had before, but ‘Brother Wyld’ wants tin roofs on all his rooms, so I suppose all our supplies will go to that instead of some of the other houses people have been waiting for.’ He pauses to snap a longer branch, clasp one end and leaning his weight through one foot in the centre. It breaks in two loudly. ‘But it’s not even that.’ He stands up straight and looks at his confidante, who is still bent over arranging sticks on her bit of sacking. Noticing his silence, she turns her head to look up at him. ‘It’s, it’s...he’s too much!’ Jim explodes. ‘Everywhere he looks he sees a problem, and dreams up twenty ways to solve it. I feel like the wet blanket all the time, humming and harrang because I know it just won’t work. ‘Get the men to do this!’ ‘Get the men to do that!’ is his answer for everything, and I know they won’t be treated like slaves. That’s one thing Reg did all right: taught them they should be paid like everyone else. And we’re just broke,

plain fact. The only thing I can get people to do these days is come to church and listen to my Bible talks in the camps.'

'That's not nothing,' Rebecca comments, and it startles him. 'They wouldn't do that for old Reg in the end. Not after he told them all off and scared away the ceremony that time. But they trust you.' She can see his adam's apple working as he swallows the tears that have come into his throat so unexpectedly, so she looks away, tying up her sack with careful knots. When Jim speaks, it is a trembling whisper.

'But what have I done, for any of them, Mrs Forbes?' Jim halts for a moment, and when he speaks again his voice is stronger. 'They're no better off now than when I first came: we could be moved off any moment, our only water is fouled and has to be boiled before it can be used, you're all still living in humpies and with no sanitation, and there's not a job to be had, except the sales of Ted's boomerangs. What's there to trust, Mrs Forbes?' He is not expecting an answer; in the closed corridors of his own mind, there is none. Then he feels her hand on his arm.

'What you need is a little bit of a rest, Mr Page, but I'm going to tell you something first. Come sit down a minute.' She leads him over to a formation of smooth blue stone bucked up from the stones of the creek bed. When the creek flooded, she had seen this formation, and others like it in the creek, turn the flow into rapids. Jim eyes this rock with hope and suspicion borne of years of trying to sink wells. It was meant to be an indication of water, this hard blue dolomite that broke their picks.

There are several perches to choose from, and when they are both settled, and trailing their hands absently over the soft curves of the rock, Rebecca begins speaking, almost to herself.

'Always cool, this rock. And so soft. Like my skin used to be, Mr Page, back in England! Your's too, no doubt. Hard to believe that, now,' and she pats her cheek. But her eyes are

twinkling. 'But its hard as anything, too, this rock. You've found that out. Seen you fellas trying to get through it for them wells: it might be the promise of water, but you have to destroy it, blow it to smithereens, to find out if it's got anything for you or not.' She checks to see if he is listening. It's hard to tell: he is staring down the creek towards the current well, whose flow is decreasing by the day. 'Or of course you can just sit back and wait for a million years and watch the water wear it away, and the sun crack it, and make nice seats for us to rest on, like this one.'

Jim is wondering what it is she wants to tell him. 'Mrs Forbes, what – ' She cuts across him.

'What you been doing ain't nothing, Mr Page. These fellas been living off this country long before you were or I were born, and while they'd like it a bit easier, and a bit of money to go round, they know how to make do. But remember, once you were here, they didn't have to. You got the rations right into camp, and now they come regular as clockwork and we can all depend on them, every week. That's not nothing. And the other thing we asked you for was a school, for the *yakarties*. And now they're all talking English and some of them can read and write, and you should hear the difference that makes, out on the stations and in at Copley. My boys can stand proud. And you want to know why they come to your church services, Mr Page? Why they pleased to have you come down to their camp and tell about the Bible? Because you respect them, Mr Page, and their ways, and so they respect yours. When you tell them about Jesus, they think that Jesus understands them, and respects their law. I've heard them talking. You tell them that Jesus loves them, and forgives them, and takes away their fears and gives them the power to live right. You know they talk about Jesus like *Arra Wathanha*? That's their one who looks down and sees everything, knows everything,

understands everything and looks out for *yuras*. That's why they trust you, Mr Page, because you're looking out for them.' Rebecca feels a little bit out of breath, but stands up anyway, ready to go, not giving him a chance to deny it. 'Better not forget that wood,' she says, and walks back over to her bundle. Jim follows, silently, watching her sling the sack over her back. 'Let's take this lot home,' she says to Jim, who with a start realises his own bundle is woefully small beside hers, but he picks it up and brings it anyway, trailing behind her on the narrow kangaroo pad she follows up the creek bank.

Jim deposits the kindling at her door, where she places her own, ready to be chopped into identical lengths. 'Thank you' seems so inadequate, but he says it anyway.

'Not at all, Mr Page. I'm just glad to have you back. Just one more thing: talk to the old people. They took you in, and they are the ones who keep this camp together. Talk things over with them, the old men. They'll know what to do.' At least she hoped they would.

Fred is helping Jim put up a brush fence around his hut, to keep the wind from snatching up the papers that he set his occasional students writing on, on the big desks he had propped up along his walls.

'What you tell that mission mob then, eh?' Fred asks, balancing a sheaf of dry brush while Jim laces the wire through it.

'Hey?'

'About Mr Thomas.'

'Oh. Haven't yet.'

'That's right.'

'Hey?'

‘That’s right. I wouldn’t say too much, *inni*. Nothing’s changed, hey, that’s what we think.’ Jim looks at the old man’s face, inscrutable as ever. Fred grins around his pipe. ‘What they want you to write to them, anyway?’

‘What they want their missionaries to write,’ and Jim breaks off with a grunt as he twitches the thick wire together, ‘what they want missionaries to write is about people becoming Christians. That’s what the UAM is for, taking the message of Christ to the natives.’ The old words are still there, he realises, although it seems so long since he spoke in the darkness to his slides and the upturned faces of a wide-eyed audience.

‘I’m a Christian,’ Fred says, relighting his pipe before he picks up the next bundle.¹²⁸ ‘You tell them that?’ Jim is looking doubtful. ‘You tell them that! You tell them which ones are Christian, if that’s what they want to know. Every time there’s one, you tell them. They be pleased with you then, *inni*?’ Jim is shaking his head, smiling. *Whence cometh my help?* he thinks to himself. To Fred he says, ‘*Wandu* – good one!’

‘*Brother Page!*’ Mr Wyld’s shrill tones erupt suddenly from the door of his quarters. He continues to call out, ‘Brother Page. A word, please, Brother Page!’ then the man disappears back inside the whitewashed building. Jim looks at Fred, who is already laying down the bundle he had been preparing.

‘I’ll be back directly.’

‘Take your time. *Wandu!*’ and Fred is chuckling to himself as he settles on the ground and pulls out his tobacco tin and knife.

THE UNITED ABORIGINES MESSENGER November 1, 1934

NEPABUNNA VIA COPLEY

16th October, 1934

Mr Page writes:- “The Lord has added to the church those who are being saved.

These are evidencing a growth in grace by character and conduct, but nevertheless need the continual strengthening of faithful prayer supporters.

A glance around the camp and one can see the evidence of growth revealed in cleanliness; the industry of the mothers to tidily dress their children; the effort of fathers to supplement limited ration by carving boomerangs etc for sale.

...Among those who have recently confessed Christ is a man and wife....

...Pray for them; also for one woman who has professed faith in Christ, and who has been noted for outbursts of violent temper in the past. After a recent trouble she has expressed intention of better behaviour. She is slightly mental. Pray for her...¹²⁹

This technique becomes a life line that Jim will cling to, becoming something to believe in when the firm rock of Nepabunna dissolves into a mire of accusation and doubt. He will always have the *yuras* to hold on to.

Nepabunna via Copley, January 1935

**photo of the letter

Dear Bro Gerard

Thanks for your letter and greetings for the season – we did have a happy Xmas – our needs were bountifully supplied – Praise the Lord for his goodness.

So you have concern for Nepabunna. No doubt. Bro Wyld has fully acquainted you with his hopes, ambitions, projects and proposals till you have been almost overwhelmed.

My reticence may have aroused your fears that there was a lack of cooperation.

However I can assure you that you need have no fear in that regard. Bro Wyld and I have our differences but all in good fellowship.

I have maintained control of the station and given Bro Wyld liberty for expression re methods and policy.

There must be an interchange of ideas to ensure cooperation.

Bro Wyld has earnest desires to see Nepabunna in a similar position to Morgans WA.

I have not caught that vision yet but that may be due to lack of faith or due to my 7 yrs experience in the work.

However I feel as you do that I don't want to cramp or handicap energy and expression but to help forward the work to the utmost along right and proper lines for the glory of God.

Since your letter arrived I have talked matters over with bro Wyld and as you know his ambition is to get full control.

He says that he feels that with the help of the Lord he could manage it.

Now I realise the position that the man in charge should be a married man and if Bro Wyld is to ultimately take over then I feel that the change should take place.

As I intimated to Miss Turner that in the event of a change of control it would be best for me to leave here to avoid possible faction that may arise from the natives attitude towards me.

I did use a strong statement that it will be the last time I shall want to see Nepabunna, however that is with reservations. You will understand my feelings.

Now I have prayfully considered the matter and this thought occurred to me.

Is it possible that I could effectively fill Miss Turners place (temporary) (this is presumption) and combine the secretary work with deputation work in the vicinity of Adelaide.

This would provide remuneration and at the same time deepen the interest in the work.

This suggestion may appeal to you and the Council could give it consideration. I have not had experience in Secretarial duties but no doubt I would be able to pick up the ropes.

This arrangement would give Bro Wyld an opportunity to work along his lines and possibly make him more contented.

(Remember that I am not wanting to do Miss Jones out of a job, because it is the last thing that I should have thought to undertake, is to sit and write for hours on end.)

However I am ready if it is the Lords will for me.

Now for some of these questions.

The iron forwarded enables us to roof in the 3 rooms of bro Eatons old place. That is all that was needed and asked for. However Bro Wyld wants to build a four roomed store building ultimately, so as far as he is concerned, it is not all that will be needed. They are in much more comfortable quarters than Eatons were.

Of course there could be many improvements but no doubt you have heard of their needs.

Water. The waterhole which is supplied from the rain catchment, meets the needs of the station at present but has considerable disadvantages. All water used for drinking and cooking must be boiled before using – then after a fresh infill it remains muddy for nearly a month.

To cart water from the well would be costly.

It would need an oil engine, a pumping plant and about ½ mile of piping to bring it to the station.

Re. School

I manage to put in about 2 months with the School but owing to the short days in the winter and the need for doing other work I stopped the school.

Mrs Wyld intends to resume this early in the New Year and then the needs can be fully mentioned.

Re. What? Why doesn't he?

If he only would!

I wonder why?

Who is it to be?

I can't make him out!

Etc, etc, etc, etc

This matter must be brought up and constantly deferred to the next (Adgenda) [Is that how you spell adgenda? I must buy a dictionary.]

Thanks for the fowls when you get them we have two hens sitting and a half a dozen pullets recently purchase.

The fowl industry is beginning to materialise.

Re. Allen returning to Oodna. He is quite capable pf travelling alone so if you obtain a pass for him and forward the same to myself he can travel as soon as Mr Eaton intimates when he will return to Oodna. I haven't written Fred nor has he written to me so I don't know his movements.

[I learn that Bro Eaton has returned last train.]

I was enquiring about a motor truck and running costs and was told that for a 1 ton truck it costs about 7d a mile so your estimate for a light truck would not be overstated at 4d a mile.

Bro Wyld knows that I do not consider that a truck would be an asset here at the present stage.

There is not sufficient use for it and its depreciation would not warrant its registration and upkeep.

As you know he is asking for [pounds] 150 to establish the boot industry (presumably). I have my doubts whether such an undertaking can be launched for that money. Bro Wyld says it can. However that remains to be seen.

One thing I wish to make quite clear is that in the event of bro Wyld being given charge of this station an alternative appointment must be provided for me. Otherwise I shall expect to remain in charge here.

A dual control is impossible and out of the question.

Bro Wyld can go forward with his industrial plans and I can remain in charge of the general running of the station.

[The foregoing was written before this incident took place.]

I treated your letter as private and passed on such information as I considered necessary.

Bro Wyld said it was a breach of confidence because I did not let him know its full contents.

This caused him to assume the role of dictator and he wanted me to tell the natives that with the New Year there would be a change of control and he threatened that if I didn't tell them, he would do so privately. I cautioned him as to such action, and fortunately he agreed to desist. I told him things were not done that way and I said you wait until the Council have officially sanctioned the change of control.

Such a thing as this should not go uncensored by the Council and I consider it my duty to acquaint you with it.

Nepabunna has sufficient enough setbacks without an indiscretion like this even being suggested. I'm quite prepared to relinquish this station but in virtue of my association with

it since its inception I wish to at least hand it over honourably. I have been able to return after two years absence and take up the work with acceptance with the natives and if need be I trust I should be able to do so again.

As far as the material advancement is concerned, the progress has been slow, finance has not permitted much development. Even the employment of natives in cutting, carting timber has to be met with remuneration.

If Bro Wyld has been dissatisfied with developments and feels that under his control it will be to the betterment of the station and for the Glory of God, then I am quite willing to accept the Council's decision in his favour with this proviso – that an alternative appointment be given me elsewhere.

Now I prayfully submit the matter to you and the Council.
Praying that the Lord will guide and direct,

Yours Sincerely
Jas Page. ¹³⁰

UAM Archives, Melbourne, 2003

This letter from Jim to Mr Gerard was what I had come here for: some clue of the tensions that began to shape Jim's world. With my Mum helping me, and my baby alternately in his pusher or on my lap, breastfeeding, we rummaged through every box Chris Jones had thoughtfully set out for us, in case there were any more pieces to the puzzle. Plenty of letters winging between missionaries at Nepabunna and their secretary in Adelaide, dripping bile about each other, but never expressed to each other. But these were from the 1940's and 1950's. There were no others from 1935. Only this letter, all nine pages of it in the original quarto size, a plaintive sketch of the unfolding drama in Jim's own voice. A Judas, a poisoned chalice, the authorities preparing a trial. Who could save him?

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Life Writing Chapter Seventeen **'He didn't want to leave us...'**

Maynard's Well, December 2007

I don't want to write the next chapter. If this were fiction I would find a pass through the mountains and lead Jim out to the plains. But this is history, and the ending is already carved forever in the mulga wood cross in that tiny cemetery at Nepabunna. It is only the journey that is uncertain. It is only the path that I can soften and smooth with a storyteller's flourish, to make the passing gentler for Jim, because I cannot change the destination.

Nepabunna, Christmas, 1934

Jim is cooking 350 rock cakes, while Bertha Wyld is baking the Christmas puddings and cakes, and Mr Wyld is resting having mixed the batter for them all under his wife's direction.¹³¹ Their daughters are licking spoons and bowls whenever they can. 'I never want to see another rock cake again!' Jim will write to Violet Turner, in a happy, helpless kind of mood after a day where all are fed and 'finished.'¹³² Jim can't help feeling softly sad that Mr Wyld played Father Christmas this time. Jim thinks he'd like to do it again, perhaps next year.

The old men have been able to hold ceremony again this year, and the mood of the whole camp is lighter, relieved, and even the women and children participate like they are going to a carnival.¹³³

'See, back to normal,' Mrs Forbes says to him under her breath, as she hurries past him with her head low, carrying armfuls of cooked meat and blankets out to the boys camp where her youngest, Raymond, is being put through the first rule. She is obviously pleased about it, and Jim ponders this long after her small figure is out of sight between the hills.

Nepabunna, February 1935

Jim is more organised these days, making sure he writes a monthly report to the UAM, knowing that if he doesn't, Mr Wyld will. He enjoys the thought that Mr Wyld will be kept guessing whether he has written one or not until the last minute when the mail truck comes collecting. The brush fence that stands like so many stooked sheaves around Jim's cottage has frustrated Mr Wyld no end, not knowing whether Jim is in or out, which room of the cottage he is in, or what he might be doing there. Like Mrs Forbes over her hill, he thinks, he has created a small pocket of privacy on this desperately public stretch of ground. And so he composes his missive.

'Dear praying friends

We praise God for your faithfulness in continuance of prayer for this section of the field. It is nearly a year since I returned here, and looking back, you with us can rejoice together over the sheaves garnered – it has indeed been a year of harvest...'¹³⁴

Jim always did have a wicked sense of humour.

This month Jim notes Dick Coulthard's conversion, now that he is deciding to settle at the mission. He writes 'Pray for Dick; he's an honest old fellow, and has had a hard life.'¹³⁵

Jim asks for wages to erect a new church:

'This would provide work for several men, but we cannot expect them to labour for nothing, or just bare tucker. We want to do the fair thing.'¹³⁶

In the meantime, he helps families build new homes for themselves from the materials to hand: mud, stone, native pines.¹³⁷ The roofs are still of kerosene tins and brush, since galvanised iron is too expensive, and all used up on Mr Wyld's building plans, but Nepabunna is becoming a cluster of cottages closer to the mission houses, instead of

dilapidated wurlies on the side of the hill. Except for Mrs Forbes, of course. She has her own reasons for staying on in her tin-clad humpy by the creek.

Jim greets the mailman and makes a show of handing over the letter he has written. In return he is given a slim package marked with the overseas postmark, and he bites his fingernails even while his heart gives a small flutter as he reads the sender's name. She seems to be missing his little 'deputation car' nearly as much as he is, and each letter wonders when he might be returning to his Federal Deputationist work.

Nepabunna April 1934

Jim has found another argument for retaining the brush fence that so infuriates Mr Wyld. He has worked busily to make a little garden behind its protective walls, carting soil from the hills to build up beds on the rocky ground. They are all carting water now, having despaired of summer rains and preparing to face the dry frosts of winter. But what the freak hailstorm did not destroy, the grasshoppers did, and even the roots of the poor seedlings have been eaten out by ants.¹³⁸ Another project tried and failed, he thinks, and does not even pause to worry at it. *Leave that to Mr Wyld, he thinks. He'll learn.*

South Australian Annual Meeting of the UAM, Adelaide, May 1935

Violet feels somewhat displaced, sitting amongst the congregation in Grote St church watching the business of the Annual Meeting take place up the front without her. She barely blinks, watching over the rims of her glasses as young Miss Jones fills in as secretary. And, believing Miss Jones's shorthand can't possibly be keeping up, she begins taking her own notes as Dr Duguid begins to speak. She doesn't want to miss one word. After all, he is such a nice man, and her own doctor to boot.¹³⁹

Dr Charles Duguid is a lay Presbyterian and a fine speaker, filled with the zeal of the recently converted. It has been six years since a nurse from Goulburn Island urged him to go and see the situation of Aborigines for himself, and he is still shocked by what he discovered in Central Australia when he took her advice. During three weeks at the AIM Hostel in Alice Springs, the facility treated none of the disease-ravaged natives he saw about the settlement. In dismay at his own church, he quotes John Flynn's padre to this sympathetic audience:

'Oh you don't want to worry about the niggers, the sooner they die out the better.'¹⁴⁰

Describing the medical conditions, inadequate rations, and violation of Aboriginal women, Duguid concludes:

Our name is already dragged in the mud at Geneva every year for our treatment of the aborigines, so we must remove the slur from the name of Australia and of Britain... What is wanted is a change in the heart of the whole continent, so that the white man ceases to despise the black.¹⁴¹

Violet beams. She couldn't say it better herself. And then the dear children Dr Duguid cares for join him on stage and begin to sing.¹⁴² Not one eye is dry in the whole church.

Before leaving the lectern, Duguid drops his bombshell. The UAM's 'own Reg Williams' will accompany and guide the good doctor to see Stan Fergusson at Ernabella station in the Musgrave Ranges, and investigate the establishment of a medical mission there.¹⁴³ Violet's lips purse together for a moment, wondering just what Dr Duguid knew about that young man. Perhaps she might say something to Doctor at her next appointment, she thinks, snippily. That reminds her: she must say something to those going on their delegation to Nepabunna in three weeks time. She is sure she is well enough to travel, and after all, few know that place as well as she.

Nepabunna, 9th June 1935

The six adults of the UAM delegation are crammed into the tiny sitting room of the Wyld's quarters, sitting close to the fireplace. It is a cold night, in this frost-prone valley. Bertha is still fussing at laying out extra beds, but Reverend Brown waves her over and she also takes her place. No-one is expecting this to be easy.

Mr Wyld moves forward in his chair and clears his throat, but George Brown speaks instead. He holds his hands clasped in front of him, and assumes a worried expression.

'We have been made aware of concerns at this Station, Brothers, and sister, and the Council is desirous of equanimity between you, for the good of the mission and the glory of God. That is the purpose of this visit, and I can see no good reason why we should not be able to arrive at this worthy aim.' He smiles benevolently at the three missionaries. All of them look less than certain: Mr Wyld has his lips pushed out, Bertha is playing with the corner of her apron, and only Mr Page sits back in his chair, his face relaxed but showing nothing. George continues.

'There have been significant set backs. I understand the well ... ?' he looks to Jim. Jim holds himself carefully in the chair. He has resolved to say less rather than more, and let what the party will observe between himself and the natives speak for him. But tonight he must be seen to be cooperative, he knows.

'It is unseasonably dry, Sir, and I fear this has had quite an effect on our wells. We are getting by with the well by the creek, but it is not sufficient, and requires boiling. The men and I' – he hopes the inference that Mr Wyld has not been invited into these conferences is clear – 'the men and I have discussed matters, and they are continuing to try new sites. It is back-breaking work without gelignite. And it pains me to watch the women and children

carting their water each day. It is at least half a mile to the well from their houses.' He stops himself. That is enough.

'That certainly must be a priority, I think we are all agreed on that,' says Reverend Brown. Jim is aware of Mr Wyld shifting a little in his seat. So far so good. 'And what of the industry here?'

'Well, when I came there was nothing, absolutely nothing,' burst Mr Wyld, and Reverend Brown lets him speak for some time of his frustration, his plans, and his barely veiled accusations against Mr Page. He glances at Mr Page from time to time, but Jim's expression does not change. He appears to be pleasantly listening. 'Mr Page, did you have anything to add?' he asks, at last.

Jim smiles. 'No, I think Brother Wyld has given a fulsome account.'

Mr Wyld grinds his teeth quietly, wondering if he can say something more, but then Reverend Brown is speaking again.

'Well, it appears that this is another important development needed for this mission. Miss Turner, did you wish to ask about the school?' Violet, delighted to be part of this oh so delicate inquiry, turns her magnified gaze towards Bertha Wyld, and adjusts her glasses as she speaks.

'Sister Wyld, can you tell us of the school?' Bertha knows she must support her husband, but feels a little uncomfortable.

'Well, when we came, there was no schooling at all, or at least, those desks at Mr Page's hut were very occasionally used by some of the older students, we believe.'

'You believe?' Violet inquires.

‘Oh, you can’t quite see, not with that fence. But they do go there sometimes, in the afternoon, after my school is over. School is conducted every morning in the church,’ she finishes, primly.

‘I must say,’ cuts in Reverend Brown, anxious to keep control of the meeting, ‘that the housing is greatly improved from what was here previously.’ Mr Wyld cannot contain himself.

‘I am sorry, but surely you can see for yourself that these – quarters – are barely adequate for a family man. I was led to believe that there would be appropriate accommodation for my wife and children, and when I got here, well the walls weren’t even finished.’ Jim makes no response, although he knows the delegation is expecting him to.

‘Yes, we are aware of the deficiencies of the missionary accommodation, and agree that is indeed regretful. I was referring to the native houses.’

‘The natives have been busy making new houses for themselves, with what they have been able to find about, Reverend Brown,’ Jim answers. ‘There are some very fine builders amongst them. I would be pleased to introduce you to Ted Coulthard in the morning, and have him show you over the stone house he has made for himself. Of course there is no roofing iron, only tins, but I am hopeful that our prayers for proper roofing for the native houses might be heard soon.’ Again, it is enough, and Jim gathers himself back into silence, hoping the guests might have seen the arrogance in Wyld’s outburst that he himself had had to live with for the past months.

‘And of course we shall look forward to seeing the spiritual side of the work tomorrow, although your reports suggest it is quite fruitful, Mr Page.’ Jim nods and smiles and murmurs a quiet ‘thank you’.

‘As I said, our purpose is to restore equanimity between you, and we shall do our utmost to see this occurs, while of course being very keen to see the operations of the mission as well, and observe the natives here. As to the control of the mission, the Council is of a view that we would only look to change control where that seems to be a requirement for the good order of the mission. Too much change can be unsettling to the natives, and we are mindful of the changes that have occurred on this station. So, if it becomes necessary, we can visit that matter a little later. Thank you both – all....’ He glances at Bertha, and continues. ‘...For the way you have welcomed us and participated in these difficult matters. I can see before me dedicated and passionate servants of the Lord, and that warms my heart. Shall we pray?’

The conference over, Jim leaves the others finding their night things in their tightly packed bags, and returns to his small hut alone. Behind the fence, even before he is inside the door, a loud breath escapes him, and he feels the tears rise in the darkness. He does not even light the lamp, but makes his way in the dimness to his cot and, lying down, lets the silent sobs shake the bed until its iron frame creaks and scrapes against the wall.

Maynard’s Well, December 2007

The reports of this consultation focus on the practical issues – water, employment, schooling and housing – and wax eloquent about the spiritual success of the mission.¹⁴⁴ The words and score of *He sends a Rainbow* are printed in the *Messenger*, in both English and an attempt at written *yura ngawarla*. The topics for the four Sunday services are instructive: ‘Redeeming Love’ at the 10am ‘Men’s Own’; ‘Bible Boomerangs of the come back kind – Sin, Life, Love, the Lord’ at the Christian’s meeting around the Lord’s Table at 11am; ‘God looking into an Empty nest’ or ‘Brooding love’, drawing on Isaiah 31 and Luke 13 at the 2.30pm

‘united Gospel Service’; and a Camp-fire Song Time with fire buckets in the church at 7pm, where the delegation learnt ‘He sends a rainbow after rain.’ Attendance from the *yuras* was impressive at four meetings. The Mission put its best foot forward, and won some converts in the process. Violet Turner sent off letters to Rev. Sexton, as he had requested, for him to forward their requests for assistance to the Advisory Council on Aborigines, which duly forwards their recommendations to the Chief Protector. It seemed Nepabunna was back on the political map, and without a change to the missionary staff either. Reverend Brown must have been very relieved at the outcome, and genuinely hopeful that they might get a new school room, roofing iron, government orders for sewing and boots, and a windmill and tank, as their requests detailed.¹⁴⁵ I wonder just how long this Reverend Brown has been associated with Nepabunna. I cannot imagine Violet harboured quite the same degree of optimism, even as she typed out the requests.

Nepabunna, June 1935

‘That old *udnyu*, he’s no good. They all saying that.’ Winnie fixes a sideways glare at Mrs Forbes, her eyebrows raised, and waiting, while her arms pumped the stick stirring the sheets in the boiling bucket.

‘Hmm.’ Rebecca hated the way the rest assumed she should be responsible for Mr Page. She liked the man, and she performed small kindnesses for him, but at the end of the day, he was a missionary and he had his own affairs to attend to. She slapped her wet dresses on the rock, which is exposed now the level in the waterhole had dropped so low.

‘The old fellas, they been talking about it. What you gonna do, Mrs Forbes?’ Winnie wouldn’t let up.

‘What do they say I should do?’ she retorts.

'I don't know. *Udnyu*. Maybe he's lonely. Other fellow got his woman, he's alright. But Mr Page, he's just one.'

'Winnie,' snorts Rebecca, catching the inference, 'I'm much too old for him! And besides he's a missionary.' She rests back on the rock, thoughtful for a moment. 'When I first come out on the ship, I remember there was all this talk about a missionary in Queensland. Got one of them mission girls pregnant. And his sister run off with a mission boy too. Oh, that was a scandal. That old man got real sick then, and you should have heard the talk. Wouldn't want to see that happen to our Mr Page.'

'Hmm,' said Winnie, mimicking her friend.

'Hey, *yaka!* Not me, I'm too old. You the one with daughters!' They are both laughing, and turn to watch Joycey, Winnie's daughter, hanging clothes out on a bush and listening to them.

'Not that one. She a good girl,' says Winnie, proudly.

Jim has barely left his hut since the delegation team left. It was, by all accounts, a successful weekend for him, and he has heard Mr Wyld muttering and stamping around the place, obviously disappointed it did not go the way he had planned. But Jim doesn't care. The strain has taken its toll.

For the umpteenth time, he reads the letter he has received from Reg Williams, and flicks open the copy of the *Messenger Violet* thought to leave with him. So Reg was to be back on the track again, this time with Dr Duguid who seemed like he had the wherewithal to set up a medical and spiritual mission in the Musgrave Ranges. Reg had even written why didn't Jim come along too? To itinerate yes: to set up another settled mission: no. He wanted to write

back, why not set up travelling teams like Rev Flynn had done, but knew this would not find favour with the good Doctor. The UAM had seemed to lose interest in travelling altogether: not itinerating, not deputation either. Nepabunna was probably the only place for him, and as a single man too.

There is a knock at his door, and some giggles. Jim considers not answering, but relents and, fixing a smile to his face, opens the door. It is a bevy of those older girls again – young women, really – and they have their sheafs of paper in their hands.

‘Schools finished, Mr Page. Can we do some writing here?’ the one who has been pushed to the front asks. He notices that she has a button missing on her shirt, and makes a mental note that he should ask Bertha to conduct some more sewing classes.

‘Of course,’ he answers, ‘I’ll get you some pencils,’ and he disappears back inside while they pick bits of twig off his fence, and wait.

‘Here you are,’ he says, flourishing a handful of sharpened pencils, and a Chorus book. ‘Sit at those benches if you like, and practise copying out your favourite hymn. You remember some of those ones I taught you back at *Minerawuta*? Well, you write them now, not just sing them.’ He can’t help smiling at them, plump and shining, so eager to learn what they can before they become wives, and then mothers, probably after the next summer’s initiations, he thinks. Then, as he knows very well, they’ll have no more time for reading and writing.

The girls are getting settled at the desks, when one of them says, ‘Mr Page, *ngami* says for you to come by later. She wants you there, that older one getting married tonight. She told me to tell you.’ Jim is surprised. They had always taken care of these things themselves, even the Christian ones. He could only suppose he had to go. ¹⁴⁶

While the girls scribbled on their paper, Jim lay on his cot inside, wondering what might happen in a native wedding.

Maynard's Well, December 2007

I have laid enough innuendo against Jim, and feel disloyal for doing so. He is a single man approaching middle age, under great pressure and intensely disappointed and lonely. Perhaps his faith was such that he kept his equanimity about him, but I do not think so. I have re-read the oral history transcripts, and sense the same disquiet amongst those I interviewed as well.

'Untrue things were said...'

'He was worrying about what he'd done I suppose. [He] might have made a mistake...'

'Some say...can't really say and no one knows and it's not the sort of thing you'd want to say or pass on really.'¹⁴⁷

Only one was straight out:

'He was mucking around with Aboriginal girls. People knew that missionaries were not supposed to do that. He had been too at Ernabella and Oodnadatta too.'¹⁴⁸

In the end, there is no proof. Remember that.

In the end, it's the kind of thing that could happen to us all. Remember that.

'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.'

THE UNITED ABORIGINES MESSENGER July 1 1935

Nepabunna

Mr. Page writes:-

A Native Wedding

On Wednesday I attended a fire stick wedding. One of the Christian girls got married. I was invited over to witness the ceremony.

All the relatives of the bride meet and follow the parson (carrying the 'udla' or fire stick) to the home or wurlie of the bride's mother, where both the bride and bridegroom are waiting.

Good Advice

The fire stick is placed between, and then the ‘parson’ leads off into a long speech in native language, in which a lot of wise laws of conduct of married couples is given to them to observe. When this is done, others can make speeches, some in English, and some in native tongue.

One thing was emphasised, that if they had a row, to have it to themselves away in the bush somewhere, but not to come making a quarrel in the camp. (True love never runs smooth, so provision has to be made for rough weather.) If they keep the good advice, they should live happy ever after.

After all had finished, I had my say and was able to give Christian counsel.

This, to my knowledge, is the first wedding to which missionaries have been invited. Superstition prevailed against the witnessing by a white person. But, praise the Lord, it is a step onward, and in future I will be called in to all weddings. I trust that, although we will maintain the ‘udla law,’ we shall be able to get them to be married in the church and have a form of ceremony.

‘Keep the home fires burning’

The fire stick starts the camp fire in the new home, and virtually is continually burning (a symbol of the bond of marriage).

J. PAGE.¹⁴⁹

Nepabunna July 1935

It is Saturday morning, and Rebecca is on her way to collect her rations. But there is a knot of people around the far end of Mr Page’s hut, where he keeps the stores and rations these days.

It seems an odd thing to do, but then, he is not always himself these days.

Rebecca can see the tall thin frame of Rufus Wilton, bending over what looks like the dishevelled mess of clothes that is Nellie Driver, when she is in one of her moods. Rufus must be in from the station, she thinks with mild surprise. Ethel would be glad. She decides to return later in the day. There look to be plenty of people there to sort it out already.

Jim is pleased to have a task to concentrate on, after the fracas at rations this morning. He was glad to have a reason to get away from the mission buildings, and Mr Wyld’s silent

amazement. Jim has a large envelope of papers in his satchel, which is slung over his shoulder. I'm about to play engineer, he thinks, and makes a small giggling noise.

At Ted and Winnie's house, Jim stops and knocks on the door.

'Ted in?'

'Mr Page.' Ted opens the door, looking a little sleepy. Jim ignores it.

'I've got a job on, Ted. Chief Protector wants a plan and all the details for the kind of windmill and pump we might want, to bring water up to the camp.'¹⁵⁰ Ted is watching him, waiting. He'd heard this talk of piping the water from the well, and was sceptical. Especially if Mr Page was involved. But he means well, he knows, and Ted is feeling keen to help the missionary, now he has joined the ranks of Christians.

'You write in that magazine about me yet?' he asks.

'I will Ted, don't you worry. It was a strong message, wasn't it? Ezekiel 33. But God needs his watchmen, to warn the people and call them from their sin.'

'I liked that bit about a watchman to sound the warning when the enemy come to invade a country. Got to warn the people. Like that old uncle, seen them coming first time, and told us. Told us about you coming too, Mr Page. Old Uncle, *nannya*. He's buried back at Mt Serle.'

Jim is touched the passage meant so much to Ted, although he cannot follow all of what he says. 'Warned you about me?' he asks startled, then to himself: 'Yes, there's warnings, alright, God gives us warnings.' Ted watches him closely. He has seen this mood come upon him before. Jim is still talking, softly. 'God warns us, doesn't fail us, it's only we who fail God. Heed the warnings!' Then Jim looks up, and laughs at himself. 'Sorry Ted, starting to think about next Sunday's sermon, that's all. Warnings, you see. Maybe God's asking you to be a watchman, and give the warning. I'll write about you, that's for sure.' He stops, takes a

breath. ‘But I’ve got a job for you, first. Are you the one I should talk to about planning a pump?’ Ted grins, and relaxes. Whatever else he might be worrying about, the young fellow is on the right track there.

‘As good a place to start as any. Might want to have a talk to Chris Ryan, and some of the others been working on wells too. Here, what’s he after?’ and Jim hands Ted the Chief Protector’s letter. ‘Right, let’s head down there. I can work it out, if you can write it down.’

That night, Jim completes his reply, and feels the healthy weariness of a full day’s work. His diagram is neat and detailed, and he has mentioned all those things Ted spoke about: clack valves, and drag pipes and force pipes. To give Ted his due, he had even written: ‘Some of the men here have had experience in erection of mills etc, and with consideration their services will be useful.’¹⁵¹ He is pleased with his reply, and with the work it represents. It is a long time since he has felt that. He stretches out on his cot, but then sits up again, and reaches for the old box of letters beneath his bed. It’s been a long time since he has corresponded, he thinks, and she will be wondering what has happened to him. Tonight, at last, he feels he has something worthy to tell her, and so he begins a new letter.

... You must forgive me for my tardy correspondence. It has been a hard season, but you will be pleased to hear that just today I have written to the Chief Protector of Aborigines requesting a windmill and pump for the well, which will bring the water right to our dwellings...

Netley, South Australian Government Archives, Adelaide, 2001

The first archival document I ever unearth to do with Jim Page, tells me that August must have been a terrible month for him. Violet has sent a letter to Jim, with a copy to Mr Wyld, containing a string of allegations for Jim to answer. It even has me doubting him: Did Jim

‘chain a native woman to a tree?’ Did he sell rations to the natives, and profit from the proceeds? Have you? Did you? Why? I stiffen in my chair, reading the letter, all at sea. I never expected this.

Maynard’s Well, December 2007

I feel so tired for Jim. The correspondence between himself and Chief Protector McLean goes back and forth, but neither seems to believe in it. McLean thinks Jim’s sketch has the windmill in the wrong position and won’t release the funds.¹⁵² Jim remains polite in his detailing of the tragically familiar progress on their ‘new well’:

The natives have sunk down another well to depth 35 ft with good indications of water. They have undertaken it on their own, but have been unable to continue through lack of supplies...The site has been divined and various ones have suggested it is a good site.¹⁵³

McLean has the grace to inquire what supplies might be necessary, and Jim replies that they would need to employ four men on the well, or alternatively engage Prices Well Borers of Peterborough who just happen to be in the district.¹⁵⁴ McLean does neither: he agrees to send extra rations for the ‘four men’. And because Jim has neglected to say if he needs detonators, and the grade of gelignite, the Chief Protector prompts him to do so.¹⁵⁵

I wish it could have been a little easier.

Nepabunna October, 1935

Jim sits outside his hut, leaning back on its walls still warm from the days heat. He is looking out across the cleared flat which looks blue and silver in so much star light. He listens to the sounds of singing and clapping in the night beyond the camp. The lick of golden campfires

marks the ceremony ground that is so plain in the daylight, and the smoke curls a slow dance before disappearing into the still air of the heavens.

There is no fence to block Jim's view, and no need of one. The Eatons' old house – then the Williamses', then the Wylids' – is dark and silent. The Wylids have finally left.¹⁵⁶ Jim feels remarkably little: it feels like neither victory nor vindication.

Jim slaps at a mosquito. They are breeding in the stagnant wells, he knows, but there's nothing much he can do about it. He rubs at the bite on his arm, and leaves a smear of his own blood where he killed it. Its little wings ball up under his palm and fall away in the darkness.

Fred has invited him to join with the singing tonight, but something is holding him back. If he goes, he thinks, there will be nobody left at the mission. *Nobody 'white' holding the fort*, and he laughs at himself, looking over the scatter of buildings the mission has managed to erect for themselves. And then there's Chris as well, claiming his 'Christian freedom' to not be beholden to the old ways.¹⁵⁷ Jim has supported Chris up til now, arguing with Mr Reschke at Mulga View to pay Chris the wages due to him, and will soon have to press that cause with the Chief Protector.¹⁵⁸ He can hardly stand against Chris in the faith he professes to share.

Jim casts around for a reason to stay sitting out in the starlight. The black hills glint with the million slate scales that cover them and draw striped patterns across their bodies, breathing silently as they sleep. They have him surrounded, he thinks, like those two *akurras* at Wilpena Pound, but the thought comforts him. He searches the sky for the stars he has been shown are the eyes of the two serpents, but instead fixes on the constellation he knows as the Southern Cross, tipped on its head, pointing down to the ranges, pointing down to where he sits. *Wildu mandawi*, he remembers, the spirit eagle's claw. That was the one they blamed for the deaths of babies when the air cooled so quickly in the evening it took their

breath away.¹⁵⁹ They said the eagle would steal the children's spirits unless the old *urngi's* could follow and rescue them, before it was too late.

Jim looks deep into the milky way, and there they are, the two magellanic clouds. He has been told about these, too. Those two mates, keeping an eye on everything, seeing everything.¹⁶⁰ It should be a comforting thought, but he is unsettled by it.

Jim hears the buzz of another mosquito by his ear, and waves at it, knowing it won't give up so easily. He yawns, and stands up, preparing to be swallowed up by the small dark maw of his doorway again, beyond the eyes of the sky. And he must write that report before the mailman comes through in the morning.

Nepabunna, via Copley, South Australia, 12th October 1935

Dear Praying Friends,

Continue in prayer for a deepening of the work of grace in the hearts of the people here. Many have responded to the Gospel message and, like Lazarus, stepped forth from the place of death at the Life-giving command of the Lord Jesus Christ...¹⁶¹

Stow Board Room, Flinders St, Adelaide November 6th 1935

Reverend John Sexton had been ready to close the meeting of the Advisory Council of Aborigines with a brief minute about the water scheme for Nepabunna. So he is chewing on the inside of his cheek impatiently as Mr Anquetil of the UAM makes an almost embarrassing description of the woes of that mission. Sexton is not sure what more can be done: the UAM's own delegation had recently visited and as far as he knew, resolved the staffing issues there. With a glance at Professor Cleland in the Chair, Sexton lays down his pen and interrupts Mr Anquetil's monologue.

‘Yes, and what would you like to ask the Council to do?’ He sees Constance Ternant Cooke shoot him a stern glare, and knows he has let his tiredness show.

Mr Anquetil is looking at him, with his moist eyes almost pleading. ‘I think it might be helpful for you to go, yourself. Reverend Sexton.’

John is not quite sure what he is asking, but he hears fear in the man’s voice, and is suddenly the pastoral secretary once more.

‘You’d like me to go.’

‘Yes. I think it would help.’

‘Well, with the Council’s indulgence,’ – as he searched their faces for guidance – ‘I shall give the matter consideration. You are moving that Mr Anquetil?’ The man nodded, and the meeting proceeded swiftly to its end.¹⁶²

‘Thank you, John,’ Mr Anquetil breathed as he shook his hand at the Board room door on his way out.

‘Not at all. I’ll see what I can arrange.’

But then he had one or two sermons to give in Advent, and it was mighty hot up north. Still, he would see about plans for a January visit regardless.

Beltana, November 1935

The donkeys are straining to pull the cart to the top of the hill where the police station sits, smugly surveying its small fiefdom from its laced verandahs. Nellie Driver has ordered her grandchildren off to lighten the load, but remains swaying on top herself, sitting with her back to Rufus Wilton who is driving. He calls her mother-in-law, and although she doesn’t speak directly to him, she had known he would do her bidding. She is on her way to Blinman

to return her grandchildren to her daughter, Eva, but there is something she wants to do here, first.

Young Rosie and Harold are fussing with the donkeys and holding them, while the adults open the gate with a complaining scrape, mount the verandah, and knock on the policeman's door. Nothing. It doesn't surprise or perturb them. They settle themselves on the shady side of the verandah. They know that everyone in Beltana will have taken note of their arrival, and that wherever Mounted Constable Rosewall is, he will hear of it soon. They can wait.

South Australian Archives, Netley, Adelaide, 2002

It seems that every police station suffers from arson at some time or another, and the gaps in the police records that have gone up in smoke are tantalisingly frustrating.

I find a reference in MC Rosewall's correspondence ledger to the receipt of a letter on 10/11/35 signed by Rufus Wilton. The annotation notes that the letter says that Nellie Driver says Mr Page is 'too intimate with the big girls' at Nepabunna. In the next column, MC Rosewall has written 'troubles at Nepabunna Mission by N Driver referred to Inspector Parsonage. Date of return 11/11/35.' MC Rosewall will wait for advice from the head of the Far North headquarters at Port Augusta before determining what action he will take. Needless to say, the original letter signed by Rufus is nowhere to be found. 'They had a fire and some of the records were lost', the pleasant archivist tells me. 'It might have been one of those.'

Government House, Adelaide, December 1935

...Owing to the fact that the wells already in use have gone back and giving a very poor supply I have had to put the men on sinking these deeper and endeavour to ensure a supply in these wells before going on with the proposed well.

One well is just a shallow well in the centre of the creek which has been supplying sufficient for the drinking purposes of the camp. The men are working on this one. The other is the one on which we intended to erect the mill. This may only need cleaning out but we cannot touch it until we have sufficient water in the other well referred to above. No doubt the dry season has had something to do with the supply going back.

Some day our well troubles will end.

All's well that ends well with a good well.

Yours Faithfully

J. Page.¹⁶³

Chief Protector McLean enjoyed reading Mr Page's letters. The slant on the lettering was so...relaxing, he thought. And 'All's well that ends well with a good well'! Glad to see the man hadn't lost his sense of humour, and Lord knows he had enough reason to. He'd have to see if he could push along supplies for blowing out those wells in the new year.

McLean lifts the letter, unclips the first front pages with the ration requests, and places the rest in his To Be Attended tray.

Nepabunna, December 1935

...There is an awful terror I feel as the light begins to fade and I hear the sounds of people calling their good nights to each around the camp. It means that soon everyone will be in their huts, or huddling close around their fires, closed to me. I used to go to the bottom camp at this time, and read the Bible in the firelight, and give the message to them, family by family. I don't know what to say anymore. And the Bible! What those words I read ever meant to them, I'll never know. They are like a window between us, where we watch each other but can't hear, can't touch. I want to smash through it, and sit with them on their side, but I never can. I scare them, the young girls and the women, and the men are watching me, wary. They relax when I have the Bible, and smile at me again. God I want to huddle amongst them, and feel their warm bodies pressing into mine, lie down around the fire with them, and their blasted dogs, with the ground pressing up through my shirt and the stars pressing down into my dreams. I wish I could crawl out of this skin, and into theirs, dark in the darkness, all of one piece at last.

But his heart is too white, and he screws up what he has written to himself and throws it into the fireplace, where the thin stew hisses in its camp oven. Mrs Forbes taught him how to eke out that tinned meat, so it would lend its flavour to the gravy for several days, until he could no longer trust the Coolgardie to keep the mould at bay. When he thinks he has written all he can bear to record, he will soak up the broth with the hard bread he baked himself, now that he has no assistants to fire the bread oven Mrs Eaton left behind.

Food doesn't interest him greatly; really, he is only cooking to fill in these night hours. That is why he writes too: he knows he will not send any of it to *The Messenger* or to his correspondents, waiting with such false expectations in Adelaide and England. He doesn't even dare to keep it for himself, lest it be found. To them, he is always such a rounded figure, considerate and active, clever and fired with belief and zeal. At least, that is how he sees himself reflected in their replies to him, and he is grateful, as he re-reads the epistles they send him. One, in a flowing hand from England, so many months out of date, has him laugh and bite his lip, the irony of her earnestness at his vocation a mockery of all his hopes now. She has no idea of the surge of sweet guilt that moves through him when she inquires after his students, his converts, his congregation, those ones who have been hounded from his morning Worship services for wearing so little to Church.¹⁶⁴ God knows he hands out all the clothing he can come by now. But they play with him and have the buttons askew, until he kneels before them to slip each bit of pearl and bone through its appointed slot. They always come in small groups, and watch each other closely as their turn for his attention comes.

Jim groans, and the sudden sound against the loneliness of his night startles him. He has forgotten himself, wandering far down his memories and imagination. He crumples up the letter in his hand and throws that into the fire too. He bends down close to watch it burn, and

the heat dries his tears so the dust tightens into fine mud on his cheeks. The flames flare and reflect in his spectacles.

‘They haven’t even given me a moiety!’ he exclaims, aloud again, not caring for a moment who might hear, until he remembers there is no other missionary to pass on the censoring whispers, or report and spy and plot against him. He takes another letter from the box where he keeps them folded, and smooths it out on the rough bedside table. He’s re-read it several times, sometimes vindictively, although he still has made no reply. He would not stoop to defending himself. That smart-arse jumped-up Mr Wyld! All the charges he levelled against Jim when the Mission delegates visited in winter...and they all came to naught. Mr Wyld was moved on, not Jim. Jim, they said, could stay, even on his own, until...until something else could be found for him. But he didn’t want to leave. He should – he knew that – but he didn’t want to, not again. When he returned, the *yuras* had all said they knew he would, even though it had been such a surprise – and a shock – to him. After all that time on the road, it did feel like he’d come home. The only home he’d had for as long as he could remember now. He throws the letter across the room, and lets it lie where it falls.

He knows what he will write, while he lets the stew thicken a little more over the ashy embers. He’ll write about home. He’ll write about home, to the dear friend in England, who will notice immediately he does not write it: Home. He’ll write about home, to the *Messenger* magazine, where Schenk will read it and think for a moment he has won, until he realises whose home this mission station has become. He’ll write about home to perhaps the one other person he thinks might understand, young Reg Williams, who knew the call of these people, and the grief of leaving.

His letters written, Jim breaks bread alone at his table, dipping a piece in the thin gravy before he takes and eats it. It is nearly finished.

Alice Springs, September 2007

I had just returned from a brief trip to the Flinders Ranges, to attend the funeral of Granny Gertie Johnson. Of course I would go, whatever the expense, and by train and hire car managed to arrive just as the service began in the brown mud brick church at Nepabunna. I had my five-year-old son Clancy with me, and we stood outside the church as many others were, hearing snatches of speeches from inside, but mostly paying our respects to the old lady and her indomitable spirit. I had realised, driving the hire car at top speed up the Leigh Creek road, that Clancy had not been in the country of his birth for more than two years. And so I had told him the story of his birth – an emergency RFDS trip to Adelaide, weeks of waiting in hospital there before we could bring him back to his home in the Flinders, where we buried his placenta in the yard at Druid Vale station, north of Hawker. ‘You belong to Adnyamathanha country,’ I said, and told him all the stories I could remember until we arrived at Nepabunna. Later, I heard him telling the kids at *Iga Warta*, ‘I’m from Adnyamathanha country.’ They looked sceptical.

As did my friend Tim, when I told him. ‘Nah. Is that right?’ Twenty years coming and going from Alice Springs, but born and raised on Anna Creek and Stuart Creek in South Australia’s outback, and he still says ‘Oodnadatta, William Creek, Stuart Creek, that’s home-country’ for him. I looked at his long brown fingers resting on the table beside his lighter, and then at his blue eyes watching a lizard skitter through his yard, and wondered. Does that mixture of Irish and Aboriginal heritage make a difference? I look at my son, tanned a dark brown and with dark eyes in a broad face, product of at least two generations of Anglo-Celtic Australians. Where is ‘home-country’ for us? Where do we belong?

Nepabunna, December 20th 1935

It was mail day, Friday, when the truck loaded with boxed orders, forty-four gallon drums, and the heaped calico torsos of station mail bags pulls to a stop in the middle of the assembled and waiting community. Jim is there in the midst of them, to untie the ropes and pull down the parcels for the store, the sacks of rations, and the tight necked mail bag. Ted helps him, as does Ted's nephew Andy, Dick's oldest son, and about Jim's age. Andy has only recently come to camp, but is a handy sort of fellow.



Photograph courtesy of Mary Woods. Used with permission.

The two men shoulder the larger items, while Jim fiddles with his keys at the storeroom door until the padlock springs back and the goods can be piled in the close dark interior. There are extra stores this time, so close to Christmas, ready for the Christmas bonus to the community, thanks to the Aborigines Protector. Jim waves, with the smile he uses in the daylight on his face, then he lets his cheeks sag and the corners of his mouth level out as he

turns with the mail bag towards the dim quiet of his hut. He takes it inside alone to sort its contents, with several pairs of eyes watching the door close behind him. Leslie Harvey in the mail truck, filling in this time for Merty Lewis, knits his brow as he watches the missionary retreat in silence. He presses his hat firmly down on his head, and continues pulling off small tied parcels some of the men have ordered. 'Ah well,' he reasons to himself, 'that one's a missionary, and you never can quite tell what's in their heads. Still, that nicely smelling letter with the graceful hand might bring him some Christmas cheer all the way from England!'

Hawker, 2001

Ken McKenzie had first told me what his father had told him, sitting in the Copley caravan park, with a guitar on his knees. Now I asked him to tell me again, for the tape, in the lounge room of my church manse in Hawker.¹⁶⁵

'When sometimes people said bad things against Mr Page, was it about those sort of things he did?' I asked.

Well the word got around: some of them said that he was running around with the Aboriginal woman. That's what word got around: some of the bad things. But Dad said that was all lies to blacken his name, you know. You see I was told [that] some of the non-Aboriginal people started some of this caper, till it got back to some of the Aboriginal people afterwards. What caused him to take his life? I was told by Dad that someone got in touch with his girlfriend and said that he was just no good.¹⁶⁶

'Oh he had a girlfriend?' I asked, curious.

'He had a girlfriend, yes.'

'Where was she?'

'She was somewhere, I don't know whereabouts. Dad never told me that. But what happened: she sent him a horrible letter or something like that, or got in touch with him by phone, and said she was finished with him. That upset him more: he had all these kind of things happening. But what made him to take his life? I think [it] was all this stress you

know. He said he loved the Aboriginal people. He wanted - he wanted something. In those days he was really like the people today wanting the best for Aboriginal people but he was in at the wrong time I guess. It wasn't a time for that. But it should have been, you know.'¹⁶⁷

Ken fell silent for a moment, and looked through the curtainless picture window to the street and the sky.

'I say it should have been at that time,' he repeated.

Nepabunna, December 20th 1935

'Mr Page?' Ted called at the closed door of the missionary hut. The light was falling and there was no smoke coming from Jim's chimney. Ted had been watching the hut from his camp since the mailtruck had left that afternoon, waiting for Jim to distribute the mail. But he hadn't emerged from the hut at all.

The door opened, and Jim stood to one side of it in the gloom of the unlit hut. 'Ted,' he said.

'You feeling alright, Mr Page?'

'I'm not ill, no, Ted. But I think I might go down to Beltana and see Reverend Patterson. Maybe when Mr Harvey comes back.'¹⁶⁸

'Do you want me to get Mrs Forbes see you?'

'No, no thanks. I don't need any medicine. Thanks Ted. Oh, I'll bring the mail in the morning with the rations. Haven't finished sorting it just yet.' Jim closed the door, and Ted turned away, wondering.

Nepabunna, Sunday December 22nd 1935

Most of the *yuras* have been out to have a look, but there is still nothing happening in the church and it is nearly eleven o'clock. Maybe it's because Christmas Day is so close. Or maybe it is because Mr Page isn't well. He hasn't seemed himself.

At that moment, nothing is in Jim's head. A letter lies unfolded on his bed, its handwriting as gracefully curvaceous as his own. But its punctuation was sharp, like the tone he hears ringing in his ears. His 'students', his 'girls', his 'loves'? How could she have known? It could only have come from Mr Wyld, vindictive, cruel man that he was. And so he was cast out, again, from England. He laughs, a wry sound that sticks in his throat. *You cannot be cast out when your exile has become your home*, he thinks. Or is he kidding himself? He takes the fresh pages covered with his flowing writing that he has not yet folded into their envelope marked for the UAM, and deliberately goes about setting his fire with them, hanging a pot of water above where the thin tissue takes flame. He takes down a basin and lays it on the table, beside a cake of soap and his razor strop. He feels anger rising in him. She may have rejected him, but he would show her. He dresses quickly in a clean white shirt, trousers and boots, and commences to shave.

His face washed and dried, Jim is moving with purpose. He buckles the neck of the mail bag, and lifts it onto the table, ready. He takes up the keys for the storeroom, and is about to leave the hut when he sees his box of letters and papers still pulled out from under his cot. He knows what he will do. It's what they all do, letting it burn away. 'Keep the home fires burning', he thinks, but does not smile. He arranges them in the grate and then closes the door behind him as they take up the flames.

Rebecca is surprised to hear a knock on her closed door. She finishes packing away her Sunday clothes, draws the rough curtain across her bedroom space, and opens the door. Mr Page is standing there, flushed.

‘Mrs Forbes, I am going away this morning and I want you to take charge of the mission.’¹⁶⁹ He is speaking quickly, and Rebecca has scarcely registered his request before he continues. ‘Also, I want you to issue the people here with the ‘Christmas Shout’ of rations tomorrow,’ and he places a set of keys in the hand she involuntarily holds out. He pushes a jar containing coins and notes towards her as well, and she takes it in her other hand. She is not sure what to do.

‘I won’t say goodbye, Mr Page, because I hope that you will soon come back to the Mission.’ But she can see Jim is not listening.

‘I can’t go down; I can’t go down,’ he is muttering.

‘Sorry, Mr Page?’

He looks up, startled. ‘Yes, yes I am. The Lord has left me and my spirit has gone. Rebecca studies him; he is looking hard at the large gum tree in the creek bed. She sees he has nicked himself shaving.

‘Mr Page, would you like me to put something on that little cut there? Come in, and sit down, while I get the salve.’ She makes to go inside.

‘No, no, the mail truck will be here soon. I must be there for it. Thank you, Mrs Forbes.’ Rebecca feels a churning in her stomach, watching him walk quickly back over the rise, both her hands full. She looks at the items she is holding, with a mixture of resentment and fear. She knows something is very wrong.

A plume of dust marks the arrival of the mail truck, like an exclamation mark coming to settle over the community.

Beltana, South Australia, 22nd December 1935

Mounted Constable Rosewall has enjoyed his morning ride on PH Equality, and estimates he has covered a good six miles going between the town and the railway station several times. All quiet, needless to say. He is looking forward to his Sunday lunch at the hotel.

He hears a skittering on the verandah of the police station, and a rather red faced child holding a push bike at a precarious angle pushes open the door.

‘Phone call for you at the station. Ma says its urgent.’ The child lowers his voice and his eyes get a conspiratorial gleam to them. ‘Somebody might be dead. Want me to get the horse for you?’

‘That won’t be necessary. Tell her I’ll be there very soon.’ Make that six and a half miles for Police Horse Equality, then, he thinks.

Copley, 2001

Rosy’s round face becomes mournful, and she holds her hands still and looks off to the hills that stand watch over Copley.

Jim Page: they cried for him when he passed away. Yes, my mother and father [were] working on the property there too, Blinman way. When they told them, the boss come round [and said] ‘Mr. Page died.’ They cried, you can’t make them stop their crying. Yes, I was just watching. We didn’t know all about it. That was it...They ringed up and someone told the boss ‘He died’ and them – mothers and all – cried, on a Sunday...*Nyanga* Mr Page.¹⁷⁰

Hawker 2001

Ken's expression hardens:

...Dad talked about that Mr. Page was a person that really loved the people. Like in those days he wanted more for the people...toilets...better housing. But in those days for some reason they couldn't do that. Mr. Page become sort of depressed with all this because he wanted better things for the Aboriginal people.

... But Dad said that when the mail truck come, that's the time he took his life you know. They say that he sliced his throat, but what Dad told me [was] that he said 'Sorry Lord, you know, [for] all this.'

And he's saying sorry and some of the Aboriginal men [like] Dad become very upset. But the last words he said [were] 'I'm sorry Lord Jesus, please forgive me. You know I've been--- I've failed in this way, I suppose, you know. I've gone through all this trouble and everything's been bad'. And as he was dying he said 'I see the Lord coming in the clouds for me in heaven'. He saw the vision of the Lord.

...The last thing he said: 'I'm glad to get out of this selfish white man world'. He said something like that because he must have been upset with the European people as well. He said 'I'm going to be with the Lord', you know.¹⁷¹

Minerawuta, 1997

Cliff stands beside the fireplace that marks Mr Page's tent site, and the small group of tourists, and my husband and I, stand opposite him, listening. Cliff tells the story of *Minerawuta*, of Jim Page's arrival, leading the people to Nepabunna, respecting their ways, and finally his death there in the community. Two things stand out for me: Jim is described like a Moses, leading the people to a promised land. And that when he cut his throat with a razor and died there in the midst of the community, he had waited until the mailman was present, so that no one in the camp would be blamed for his death. Even in death, he tried to protect the people.

'You, you're like Jim Page,' Cliff said to me and my husband later that day, when the tourists had gone. 'Church people, fighting for land rights for Aboriginal people. How's that.'

Iga Warta, 2001

When I interviewed Cliff several years later, in the cultural tourism centre he and his family had built, he reflected on Jim's refusal to try and convince *yuras* to live like white people.

...Then Page was told if he didn't do that he would be then posted away. And the thing is that they got him to be picked up just before Christmas in 1935. It was 22nd of December 1935. He committed suicide. Yes, he was stressed out, that's what the [Adnyamathanha] people said too.¹⁷²

Of all the old people who passed story and history to Cliff, he said none had mentioned to him about Page having an affair:

Maybe they mightn't have been told that, or see some of the things in Adnyamathanha were taboo you know, like if anything happened they wouldn't mention it, so its not going to carry on.¹⁷³

Port Augusta, 2003

Irene Mohammed, Andy Coulthard's daughter, shares the story she remembers, now that her mother Dolly cannot recall so clearly.

My father tried to help Mr. Page when he did what he did to himself, but he pushed him away, he didn't want help. My father always said he was a really good friendly fellow who worked with the people and wanted to do a lot for the Adnyamathanha people. That's why he did what he did because he wanted to do things for the people but he couldn't do much. That's all I heard. They didn't talk about him and in those times children weren't meant to ask things and the adults didn't tell them.¹⁷⁴

Copley, 2001

Dolly was still living independently at Copley when I first asked her about Mr Page. She said her husband, Andy Coulthard, tried to stop Jim's bleeding with a pepper packet, but couldn't. She wasn't there: her family were away at Beltana when Jim died. They heard about it on

their way back when they got to Patsy Springs and Mr. Whyte told them ‘That missionary has killed himself’ and her Dad said “No that can’t be right” but it was. *Nyanga, Mr Page.*¹⁷⁵

Beltana, 2001

I hadn’t yet become firm friends with Keith Nichols, and spoke with him from my car window where the wiry old man had hailed me at his gate. Did he know about Mr Page at Nepabunna? I asked.

Jim Page was a missionary who cut his throat. Mert Lewis wasn’t on the mail run that day – Mr. Harvey was (I went to his wedding) – and he said ‘just as well’, he couldn’t have coped with it. Jim went into his hut or tent and told the mailman he was just getting the mail bag, wait a while, then he came staggering out with blood everywhere...I think everyone knew why. He got a letter saying a woman he was supposed to marry from England was coming out. You wouldn’t find the letter, he’d have burnt it.¹⁷⁶

Later, when we shared extra cups of tea just to prolong our visits together, he added his own thoughts on the rumours surrounding Jim’s death:

...like as far as concrete evidence or anything like that, well we don’t know. But I think that that could’ve been very true because the mailman would know and that’s where I heard that part from: old Mert Lewis. I suppose it was from Mert anyway – most likely was from him – that he’d taken a letter to him from England and well look[ed] at [it] I suppose and see the postmark on it from England. And then the fact that he committed suicide: well I suppose they put two and two together and got five ... after he died there were that sort of rumours around that he’d been having affairs or one affair or something.¹⁷⁷

Gladstone, 2002

Enis Marsh opinion came across strongly as she reflected on what she had heard, and what she knows:

Oh people talked about him. They talk about him now as if it only happened yesterday...Because now, really it’s bought up because of suicide, suicide rate is so high now, not only in our community but everywhere. I think that’s really why they talk about

it a lot you know, and I don't think the people really got over the shock. (*Yuras* still go to talk to the grave saying 'Why did you do that to us?' *Yuras* always do that.)...I think that they probably thought 'How could he do this?' You know, he was a missionary, he was a man of the God, and a white fella as well: how could he possibly do that you know? Or why did he do it? Yes.¹⁷⁸

Nepabunna, 2001

Granny Gertie was a teenage girl at Nepabunna when Mr Page died. She put it down to rumours that he had had children with Aboriginal women further north, and drew on other instances to back it up: Mr Warren and missionary Pearce at Finnis Springs, and the arrest and imprisonment of the superintendent of the Bungalow half-caste home in Alice Springs for sexual abuse of the girls, just the year before Jim's death.¹⁷⁹ She was adamant that as he died, he said 'I got to weep it, I got to weep it'...' might be, God made him to think about it.'

She said:

...he waited till the mail truck come. When the mail truck come he went in and going to get the mailbag and done that. Because he didn't want any of the black fellows to get the blame for it.

I grappled with that phrase 'I've got to weep it,' but could get little from it beyond a sense of repentance. Gertie went on.

'Oh, we couldn't, we couldn't rest too, everybody was crying, everybody was crying for him, we had no church that morning.'¹⁸⁰

During my next visit, I tried again to understand 'weeping it':

'What's the meaning when he said 'I'm going to weep it'?' I asked.

'Weep it: he got to weep them. His mind I suppose. Yes, to get it away. Now well, the mail truck was there and they wanted to pick him up, and he said 'No, let it go, let it go.' And he went inside and he died. *Nyanga*, oh everybody was crying for him.

'*Nyanga nyanga. Nyanga*: oh we did feel sorry. Though we did cry for him, we did cry for him, we did cry for him.'¹⁸¹

POLICE REPORT Beltana Police Station 22nd December 1935



The packet of the Coroners Report for Jim Page, South Australian State Archives¹⁸²

To Charles Harold Downer, J.P., Coroner

BELTANA

SUBJECT: Re Death of James Page at the Nepabunna Mission between 11 am and Midday on the 22nd Day of December, 1935¹⁸³

I beg to report that at 12-30pm on the above mentioned date, George Fredrick Lewis, storekeeper of Copley, reported to this Station per telephone, that James Page

(Superintendent at Nepabunna Mission via Copley) had cut his throat with a razor on this date, but that he was still alive.

Accompanied by Sister Trevilion of the Mitchell Home, Beltana, and Yourself, arriving at Copley en route to the above mentioned Mission, on this date, the abovementioned Mr Lewis informed me that James Page was now dead.

In your presence I viewed the body of the deceased James Page at 7pm at Nepabunna Mission today, and the following are the particulars that I have ascertained concerning the death of the deceased.

I would respectfully request to be instructed as to whether you deem an inquest necessary or otherwise.

MC Rosewall

LESLIE HARVEY, mail driver from Copley to Moolawatana Station and residing at Copley, states:-

Sometime between 11am and noon on this date, I called for the mail at Nepabunna Mission. I left my motorcar stationary only a few yards distant from the hut of James Page at Nepabunna Mission. Andy Coulthard, (half-caste aboriginal) said to me, 'You had better take Mr Page into Copley with you, he is a bit crook.'

Mr Page came along with the Nepabunna mail bag, and he placed same in my motor car. I said to Mr Page, 'How do you feel Mr Page?'

He said, 'Not too good.'

I said to him, 'You had better pack your things and come into Copley with me.'

He said, 'It will take a long time to pack the things.'

I said, 'It won't take you long, I have plenty of time, and I'll wait for you.'

He said, 'Right I think I will.'

Mr Page then walked straight back to his hut. There were several half-castes standing near the hut of Mr Page. I continued speaking to Andy Coulthard for about one minute after Mr Page left my motor car, when I heard groans coming from his hut, and one of the half-castes called out, 'He has done it.'

Andy Coulthard and I rushed into the hut, and I saw Mr Page lying with his back on the kitchen floor and his throat cut. I saw an open razor covered with blood lying on the table in the same room. Mr Page was making a gurgling sound in his throat – like as if he was trying to speak – but I could not understand what he was trying to say.

I sent one of the half-castes to Mrs Forbes for some lint and bandages, and he returned with same in a few minutes. I then placed the lint and bandage over the cut on the throat of Mr Page. The deceased breathed for about ten minutes, and then died, but he did not become conscious. Andy Coulthard and I were present when Mr Page died, and there were a number of half-castes outside the door of the hut. I then sent two half-castes (Steve and Samuel Coulthard) to Angepena Station, about twelve miles distant, to telephone Copley for the police.

Andy Coulthard and I were present after Mr Page cut his throat, and when he died I folded his arms across his chest, and covered the body with a blanket, but I have left everything else in the room the same as I found it. I do not know of any person who actually saw Mr Page cut his throat. I believe that I was the last person to whom Mr Page spoke, before he cut his throat.

Mr Page did not say to me at any time that he was intending to commit suicide, neither did he say what was the matter with him.

ANDY COULTHARD (half-caste aboriginal) 33 years of age, and residing at Nepabunna Mission states:-

I have known Mr Page of this Mission only for the last three weeks.

Since last Friday when the mail arrived at this Mission, Mr Page seemed a different man, and very worried, but I never suspected or heard him say that he was going to commit suicide.

I spoke to the mail driver today, to persuade Mr Page to go away and see a doctor. I was speaking to mail driver when I heard a gurgling sound coming from the hut of Mr Page. The mail driver and I entered the hut, and I saw Mr Page lying on the floor with his throat cut, and I heard him saying something like 'Don't worry about me.' I saw the mail driver place a bandage over throat of Mr Page, and I stayed in the room with the mail driver until Mr Page died.

EDWARD COULTHARD (half caste aboriginal) 58 years of age, residing at Nepabunna Mission, states:-

The deceased now lying dead in the kitchen of the hut at the Nepabunna Mission, is the dead body of James Page – the late Superintendent of this Mission – aged about 30 years. I have known Mr Page for eight years, and he was well liked by almost all the people here, except a half crazy gin, named Nellie Driver, who was jealous, and suspected Mr Page of not giving her as much rations as other people here.

I have never heard that Mr Page was too intimate with the young girls at this Mission. Mr Page seemed alright until he received the mail at about 3pm on Friday last.

From last Friday, Mr Page seemed very worried, and I said to him, 'Are you feeling ill, Mr Page?'

Mr Page said, 'I don't want a doctor or medicine, but I would like to go to Beltana and see the Rev. Patterson.

I did not hear Mr Page say that he would commit suicide.

REBECCA FORBES (the only European woman residing at Nepabunna Mission) states:-

At about 11am on this date, Mr Page came to me and said, 'I am going away this morning and I want you to take charge of the Mission, also, I want you to issue the people here with the 'Christmas Shout' of rations tomorrow.' Mr Page then handed me the keys of the

storeroom, also a glass jar containing money, but he did not say how much money was in jar (Money counted and found to be \$14.0.6)

I said to Mr Page, 'I won't say goodbye, Mr Page, because I hope that you will soon come back to the Mission.'

Mr Page kept repeating, 'I can't go down; The Lord has left me and my spirit has gone.'

At times, Mr Page did not seem right in his head.

I do not associate with the other people here, and I do not know if Mr Page was very friendly with the young girls or not.

When I visited Mr Page for rations, I always took someone else with me.

THOMAS ROSEWALL:- Mounted Constable, stationed at Beltana, states:-

In consequence of a report received from George Lewis at Copley, on this date, in company of Sister Trevilion and Yourself (Coroner) I proceeded to Copley, then accompanied by yourself, I proceeded to the three roomed cottage of James Page at Nepabunna Mission, which mission is about 62 miles distant from Beltana. At about 7pm, in your presence I entered the above mentioned cottage, and found the dead body of a middle-aged man, dressed in trousers, shirt and boots, with arms folded across chest, and a blood soaked bandage around throat.

The dead body was lying on the flag stoned floor of the kitchen of the above cottage, and there was also an open blood stained razor lying on a table quite close to corpse. There was also a large pool of blood on floor near corpse. Not any of the furniture in room was disarranged, neither was there any sign of a struggle having taken place in any of the three rooms. I removed the bandage on throat sufficiently to see a gaping wound about four inches long across front of throat, which showed that the wind pipe had been severed. There were no other marks of violence to be seen on the body of the deceased. In your presence I searched the body of the deceased, also the three rooms where the body was found, but was not able to find any evidence that would show the reason for deceased to commit suicide, neither was I able to find any person who actually saw James Page cut his throat. Money to the value of \$15.0.0 was found in bedroom of deceased. I questioned Nellie Driver but was not able to elicit any information from her, except that 'Mr Page was very friendly with the big girls at Nepabunna Mission.' I have attached a letter dated August 1935, signed by VE Turner, and concerning the deceased, such letter having been found in bedroom of deceased on this date.

Signed by MC Rosewall, and CH Downer, Coroner, who agreed an inquest was unnecessary.

Nepabunna, December 22nd 1935

The sun sends out gold with the last of its beams, braiding the edge of trees and buildings with the dying light of the day. That's when the motor car arrives, and when finally someone steps over the threshold of that hut. By the time MC Rosewall and Coroner Downer re-emerge, night has fallen. They have left a lamp burning by the body.

The stars wheel by slowly this night, and no one sleeps. They gather together around fires, safe against the spirits of the night. Even Mrs Forbes remains in the Top Camp. The white men visit the fires, and talk to this one and that, and take notes to confirm their questions. Ted and Andy meet their gaze, stand up and speak quietly. Rebecca does her interview quickly, in tight-lipped sentences, every muscle in her wiry frame taut, holding herself together. Nellie will not speak at all save her first outburst. Others are casting glances about, and Nellie sits in the doorway of her hut, silent.

After completing their paperwork on the bonnet of the car, the men bury the body in the dark, away up the southern slope beyond the camp. Perhaps Sister Trevilion mopped up the blood in the hut meanwhile. And then the car pulls out.

For the next five days, the *yuras* at Nepabunna mourn the *udnyu*, in their ways. Perhaps there was blame, perhaps there was retribution, perhaps there was wailing or perhaps there wasn't. The campfires kept burning. Nobody knew where his spirit was.

Beltana, December 23rd 1935

The party pull in at Beltana at two in the morning. The men see Sister Trevilion safely to the hostel, then continue to the Downers station at Moorillah, to finish the paperwork and pour a stiff drink before MC Rosewall motors home ready to submit reports and exercise his horse in the morning.¹⁸⁴ He attaches the letter he found in Mr Page's cottage to the report, and pauses to read it before putting the package in the mail bag, ready for the next train.

THE UNITED ABORIGINES MISSION

Mildmay Centre
62 Gawler Place
Adelaide
August 1935

To Mr J Page and Mr. A Wyld
Dear Brothers in the Lord

In reply to a letter received from Mr Wyld regarding certain transactions of Mr Page, the Council request that Mr Page answer the following questions:

Have you at any time opened a letter that was addressed to a native, without the knowledge of the addressee?

If so, can you justify the action?

Mr Wyld says that you had a brush fence around your house; that within that fence boys and girls have had to wait ten or twenty minutes for stores that were in the house; that this led to an accusation of immorality against you by a native woman; that after a violent scene, you chained the woman to a tree; that Mr Wyld subsequently removed the fence.

Do you consider that you having the store in your house and the fence around it would or could lead to suspicions of that nature?

Did you chain a native woman to a tree?

If so, was the action justified?

Did Mr Wyld have your sanction to remove your fence?

Where is the store now?

Can you suggest a better location?

Mr Wyld said that on one occasion there were six bags of sugar more than you needed in the ration shed, which you endeavoured to get rid of when you thought the Chief Protector was coming, so that he would not see it; that on another occasion there were four bags too many; that you are giving one man two pounds of sugar a week more than he is entitled to. Have you at all times honourably carried out your obligations to the government in the distribution of ration?

Can you explain the incidents referred to?

Mr Wyld said that you sold two bags of ration flour to the natives, and that he told them it must not be done.

Have you ever sold rations to the natives?

If so, what was done with the money?

Was everything so sold fully restored?

In speaking the natives against your action do you consider that Mr Wyld lowered your reputation in their eyes?

Mr Wyld says that you derived undue personal profit from the store.
It will be understood that as the store is now controlled from the Council all future profits will be used as directed by the Council for the benefit of the station.
Mr Wyld says that you asked the police to visit the camp.
Was that necessary? Why?

Mr Wyld stated that he wished the Council to either remove Mr Page from Nepabunna or to consider the resignations of Mrs Wyld and himself.
Before this alternative can be considered, the Council requests that Mr Wyld will answer the following question;

Are you prepared to place your future allocation, as well as Mr Page's, in the hands of the Council, and accept transference from Nepabunna yourself if the Council should so decide?

Judgement as to the contents of Mr Wyld's letter will be reserved until the answers to these questions are received. We would like a reply by return post if possible, so that a special meeting of the council can be called, and this matter dealt with and finalised before the Federal Conference, which will be in a fortnight.

With Christian love to you all, and with deep regret that it has been necessary to write this letter,

VE Turner
Secretary, UAM

THE UNITED ABORIGINES MESSENGER January 1 1936 p10

A STOP PRESS is printed at the back of *The Messenger*:

In the midst of our Christmas festivities a great sadness has fallen on us in word just received of the death at Nepabunna of our brother, Mr J Page. A telegram was at once despatched to Mr F Eaton, of Oodnadatta, to proceed to Nepabunna instead of coming to the city, as he was planning to do, with Mrs Eaton and six native children for the holiday camp. Mr Eaton has replied by wire to say that he would leave for Nepabunna the following day (the day on which this report is being written). What this will mean to our work here can scarcely be realised, and we ask prayer for the bereaved ones in England, and for the natives of Nepabunna in this sudden blow.

It is surrounded by thick black lines.

Copley, 2005

There have been so many deaths in the Adnyamathanha community that the Pika Wiya Aboriginal Health Service has instituted 'Sorry Days' where funeral cards and photographs are laid gently on the white tableclothed trestles, and family and friends move slowly amongst them as Slim Dusty sings endlessly over Umeewarra Radio speaker system. We are all fed with platters of chicken and salad, and sometimes I am asked to say a prayer, for them all. This year, a stone monument has been erected at Copley.



Photograph courtesy of Tracy Spencer

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