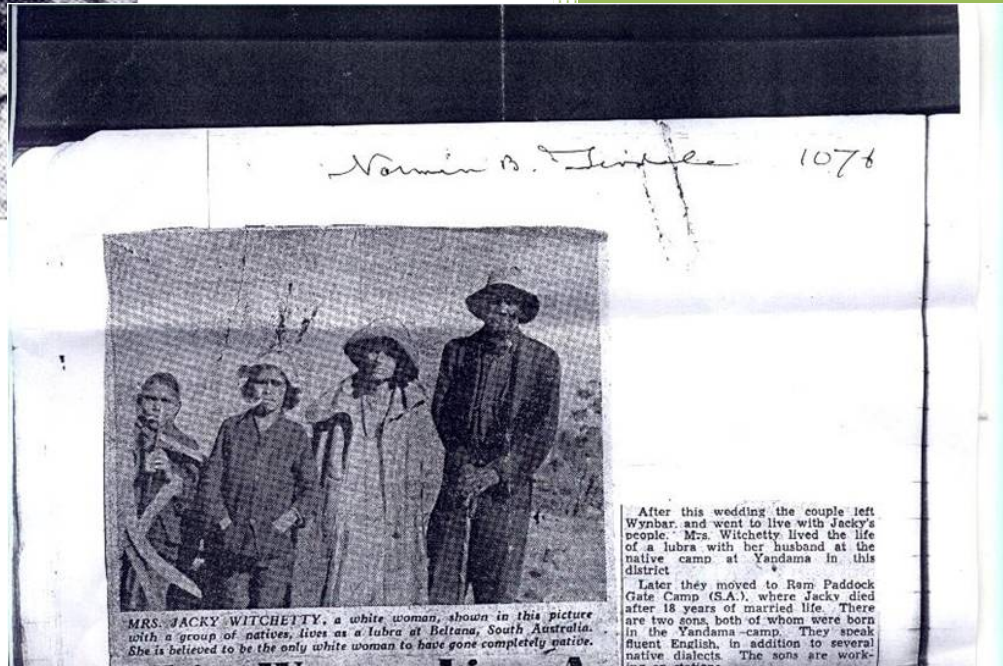




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## Thesis Title:

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

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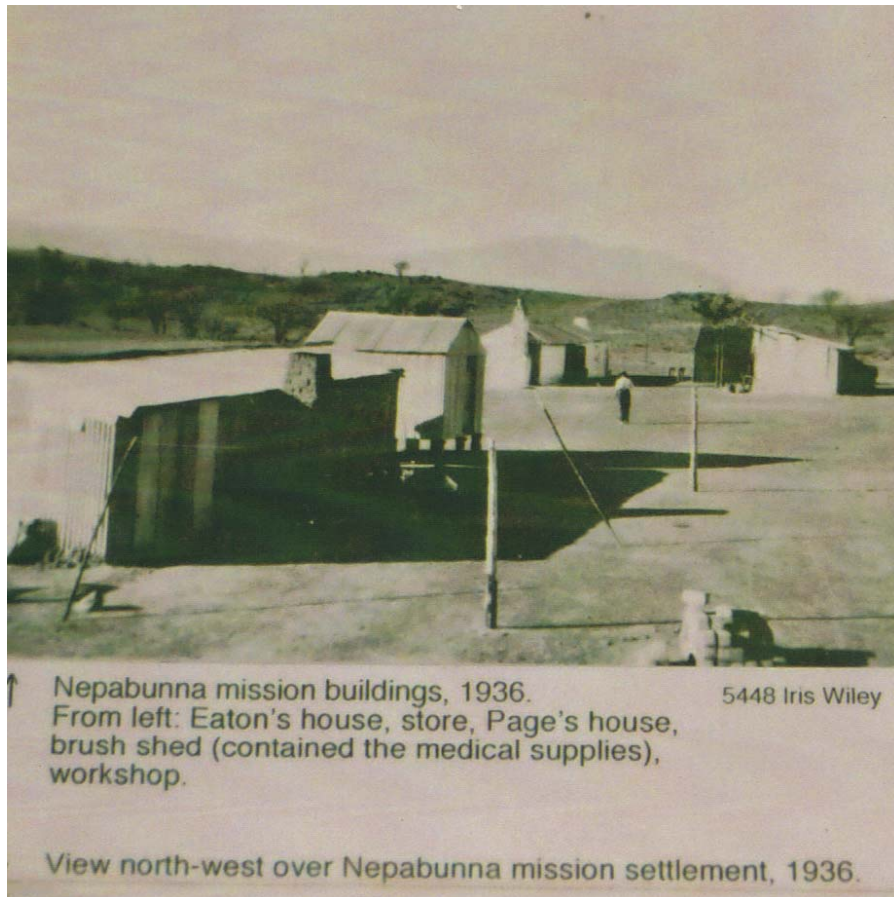
**Volume Three Appendices: Creative Life Writing**  
*Section F: Belonging*

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## Life Writing Chapter Eighteen

### Memorial



*Photograph of display at Iga Warta courtesy Tracy Spencer*

### **Nepabunna, Boxing Day December 1935**

Rebecca can see by the shadow of her stick on the swept ground that the mail truck will be here shortly. She can see by a plume of dust to the west that it is nearly here. But she keeps sweeping at the poor ground, covering herself in dust, and making no preparations to tidy up to go and meet the mail. She is glad Mr Eaton is coming; it is not that. Her teeth grind together and she looks hard at Raymond collecting wood for her in the creek. She is just

angry, and knows better than to seek company when this is upon her. Of course they would have to have a proper funeral for Mr Page, and she would attend that, when the time came.

Some children approach her carrying buckets, and she returns to sweeping, and doesn't look at them.

'Mrs Forbes, where's Ray? Everybody else waiting for the missionary.'

'Creek,' she says.

'We gotta get white rocks for doing that grave properly, when missionary get here. Is Ray gonna help us?' Rebecca stops sweeping, and looks at Ray again. Yes, he should.

'Yes. He's down there. You tell him.' And then as an afterthought, 'That's nice of you.'

### **Nepabunna, March 1936**

The girls are at Mrs Forbes's door again, with more papers for her. She calls them in, lays the table with her white enamel cups, and pours them tea, while she thumbs through what they have brought her. Two editions of *The Messenger*, and the *South Australian Government Gazette*, which she can only guess someone has chanced upon at Copley. She pulls her scissors out of her bag, while the girls sip their tea.

'What do they say, Mrs Forbes?' they ask, as she starts to snip around the articles.

'Well, this one Mr Eaton wrote about the little funeral we had, and how seventy of us were at the Lord's Supper on that next Sunday. He says 'Our God is a God of the impossible.' I think we surprised him,' she says, dryly. 'Then he says about the races, and the Christmas Tree we had New Years Day.' Grins have spread across the girls' faces. 'And finishes, 'They all loved Mr Page –'

'Mrs Forbes!' cuts in the oldest girl, her eyes glancing about the table top.

Rebecca coughs. ‘...They all loved that *udnyu*; he was their first missionary; and I joined him a month after the mission was opened.’<sup>1</sup> You girls remember that, don’t you?’ The girls have their faces in their pannikins, and then one wipes her hand across her nose, and sniffs. Rebecca leaves her question, and picks up the thick *Gazette*, scanning through the alphabetical listings, and reads to herself:

J Page; date of death or when reported, 22nd December, 1935; native of England, missionary, 35 years of age, medium build, fair complexion, about 5ft 8 in high, light-brown hair, bald on top.

The deceased committed suicide by cutting his throat with a razor in the kitchen...  
...The deceased has no relatives in the state of South Australia. The death was reported to CH Downer JP, Coroner, who deemed an inquest unnecessary, and gave the certificate of burial. A brother of deceased is believed to be residing in England.’<sup>2</sup>

Rebecca holds her lips hard together, and says nothing, but cuts the article out. The girls have started flicking through the other edition of *The Messenger* and push it towards her.<sup>3</sup> She scans the article quickly before telling the girls its news:

A life devoted to the Lord and the aborigines of our land, and full of good works, has suddenly closed. Ten years of difficult service, part of which time was given to pioneering and camel team work, helped to sap the strength of a beloved brother, and to-day sweet memory of a fragrant life abides his ‘passing’. A fruitful life has closed.

Only ‘Good-night,’ beloved, and not ‘farewell’!  
...The lonely tomb at Nepabunna in the heart of our fair land, bears striking testimony to our native people to the cost of their emancipation.<sup>4</sup>

Rebecca breaks off, stands abruptly, and waits silently for the girls to file out. One lingers at the door, and Rebecca frowns.

‘At Bible Class Mr Eaton said ‘he laid down his life for others’, and ‘spent himself ministering to all the people.’ What’s he mean, Mrs Forbes?’<sup>5</sup> Rebecca looks out into the bright sunlight, and watches the slow drift of summer storm clouds over the hills. Might bring rain, might not.

‘It means he did his best, and just got worn out trying. He was good to us, *inni*?’

‘Yes, Mrs,’ and the girl hangs her head. Then she jerks it up again, brightly. ‘You got any cake for us, Mrs Forbes?’

‘Get away with you!’ says Rebecca, shooing them from her doorway, but she is smiling a little.

The girls head off towards the waterhole, chattering together. Rebecca fills her water basin and begins to wash the cups, turning the old phrase over and over in her head: ‘He laid down his life for others.’ She wonders how Mr Page’s death will help any of them at all.

### **Adelaide, June 1936**

The Advisory Council of Aborigines has at last received the report from the belated and somewhat guilty delegation who made it to Nepabunna.<sup>6</sup> Goodwill towards the mission is suddenly bountiful – the Council urge a now quite willing Chief Protector to send support for sinking a bore for the community, along with the engine he promised Mr Eaton for milling wood for the houses, and for the previously banned harvesting of native timber from the pastoral lease.<sup>7</sup> But at what cost these small assistances? They had lost one of their own. Really, they had all liked Mr Page, with his gentle tone and beautifully composed letters. They could see Mr Eaton was quite a different character: he kept *at* you, that man. In fact he had buttonholed Sexton on the question of the mission becoming a reserve, until Sexton had agreed to see what could be done, despite the renewed Balcanoona lease omitting this provision the previous year. Mr Thomas at least had agreed to the Commissioner of Crown Lands overseeing the agreement with the mission, not just himself.<sup>8</sup> Mr Thomas had been shocked at events, too.

It was a sombre meeting, and not for that matter alone. The Council was about to be restructured into a 'Board'. No one – not even Reverend Sexton – knew if and when they would meet again. But there was no need for anxiety, really. The Department would proceed with this, as with everything, at its familiar pace.

### **Maynard's Well, December 2007**

Eaton might have been gruff and at times a little foolish, and his handwritten letters and reports are nearly unreadable, but the determination with which he took up the dangling threads of Jim's projects almost endeared him to me. Almost. For someone poring over archival documents, his handwriting really is awful.

Rather than press his advantage with a sympathetic Chief Protector, Eaton talked up the capacity of their current wells in the hope of gaining the larger area of McKinlay Pound in the hoped for Reserve. His bold request lost him sympathy with the Pastoral Board, and probably with Roy Thomas as well, and the government put a 'go slow' on plans for a bore while the need was not urgent.<sup>9</sup> In fact, it would be several reports of sickness from the rockhole water and twelve months of waiting before McLean authorised construction of a windmill, tank and piping from the wells to the settlement.<sup>10</sup>

While stymied on one front, Fred attacked on another by reopening the sensitive debate about the place of ceremony in the lives of Christians at Nepabunna.

I had a talk to the leader of the camp, with the result that we drew up a plan as to what was Christian and what was evil in their ways. Then we called a meeting with the men, and I told them of the evil of trying to serve two masters, and made it quite plain that no one would be allowed at the Lord's Table who indulged in things that belonged to Satan. After the meeting, the men had a meeting amongst themselves which lasted two hours. These people take things seriously. On the following Sunday, we had the Lord's Table, and our numbers were considerably reduced. As a rule, 70 attend the Christian service, but our

numbers went down to 36. I crave your prayers for those who are still clinging to the old things. You can see by their faces that they are not happy. The devil fights hard to keep those he has for so long held in bondage.<sup>11</sup>

Eaton's theology is the other reason I found him less than endearing. He became judge and jury of Adnyamathanha culture. He approved the marriage laws, and attended the *Vadnapa* first stage initiation and decreed it 'Christian.' Eaton did not attend the *Wilyeru* ceremony, but claimed he was told that it 'give[s] a man a Black heart.' Eaton contrasted this with his claim that 'The Lord Jesus Christ gives them a white heart' and hence determined that the *Wilyeru* ceremony was un-Christian.<sup>12</sup>

A consequence of such theology was recorded by anthropologist CP Mountford:

...Fred McKenzie ... could not explain the ban on *Wilyeru* (initiated men). He said that he was a Christian and always used to attend the Christian (communion) meeting. On two occasions however, when he attended at the communion service, neither the cup of wine nor the bread was offered to him. On the first occasion he thought it was a mistake, but when the second time came, he knew it was intentional. He 'grieved' about the incident for a long time, for he wanted to be a Christian, but decided that as they did not want him, well, he did not want to go near them... If all the 'Christians' in this camp were 50% as good a type as McKenzie, well the mission authorities would have little trouble on the station.<sup>13</sup>

In the event, Eaton would also force Mountford to make the same choice.

### **Nepabunna, 20th December 1936**

Rebecca is surprised and a little annoyed to hear that the anthropologist is due back in the settlement tonight. Last time, Charlie Mountford – or Monty – and his friends from the museum, took plaster face casts of those that Mr Eaton had cajoled into lying still for these strangers and their thick wet bandages, and Rebecca had had to treat one man for quite a nasty burn in his eye where the plaster fell in.<sup>14</sup> Still, the old men had liked Mr Mountford



and it seemed this time he was on his own. She wonders if he would be in time for the service tonight.

Ted Coulthard has finished carving out the lettering Rebecca had marked for him on the pieces of mulga wood, and is taking them to Noel Wiley to knock together into a cross.

Neither said much; Noel was still new to this mission, with his wife and children, and the people had been wary of embracing a newcomer. 'Fair enough', he had thought, 'given the history'. Ted, whose idea the memorial service had been, is preparing himself for it. Tears would not befit a *Wilyeru* man and a Christian, at this service.

Fred Eaton is putting the final touches to his speaking notes. He cannot but think fondly of his 'dear departed brother in this work', for all the times they shared, for all Jim's enthusiasm and thoughtfulness and hopeless inadequacy at practical work, he remembers, smiling a little, and surprised how quickly the prickle of tears follows behind his memories. He will have to control that at the service.

Fred has chosen his text carefully: 'A good name is better than precious ointment'. He has picked out 'Rock of Ages cleft for me' to start the singing.<sup>15</sup> The natives would choose others to sing, he was sure. If they come. This was after all a Christian Memorial, and many of the older ones had been making a point of boycotting Christian services. That was why Ted Coulthard had suggested moving the service from Sunday morning, and Fred Eaton, a little piqued, had agreed but only if it could be held at sunset. That would sort out their superstitions, he had thought, and that silly rumour about strangers walking the camp at

night.<sup>16</sup> The girls had been too scared to attend Sunday evening meeting because of that. He wonders, a little vindictively, if it will keep them away tonight.

Children are still combing the hillsides for flowers, their silhouettes picked out in the honey light of late afternoon. The native flowers are small, and their stems short. The girls are struggling to make up bouquets so they weave them into garlands with eucalypt leaves instead.

A little before sundown, Fred Eaton, Noel Wiley and Ted Coulthard began to walk together up the slope toward the lonely rectangle of white gravel that marks Jim Page's grave, as so many other graves had been marked in seemingly random and isolated spots among these hills. But nothing is random here: Jim has been buried in the right place, between the *Mathari* and *Arruru* cemeteries hidden in the folds of the hills.<sup>17</sup> His body lies north-south, facing the north, as the policeman had deemed proper, not knowing whether God would grant him clemency or no.<sup>18</sup> The men use a crowbar and shovel in turns to make a hole at the head of the grave, and knock the cross firmly into the ground.

Rebecca is making her way up the hill with what Eaton would describe as 'men, women, boys and girls of all sizes and ages.'<sup>19</sup> Just about the entire camp converges on that tiny cemetery, as the sun inches closer to the ridge of *Arta-wararlpanha*, Mt Serle, in the distance.<sup>20</sup> The white stones and gravel are covered with the wild flowers the children have brought, and some stand crying because they want to throw on more, but have run out. The accordion's strains command silence, and then the singing begins:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me

Let me hide myself in thee  
Let the water, and the blood  
From thy side, a healing flood  
Be of sin the double cure,  
Save from wrath and make- me- pure-

Whatever Mr Eaton is saying, each is taken up with their own memories of Mr Page, fresh as if it only happened yesterday. *Nyanga*, Mr Page. When Fred asks for a final chorus, the choice is unanimous:

There is power, power, wonder working power  
in the blood, (in the blood),  
of the Lamb (of the Lamb);  
There is power, power, wonder working power  
in the precious blood of the Lamb.<sup>21</sup>

Precious blood, flowing freely, that assures a *Wilyeru* of health for life.<sup>22</sup> Precious blood, that spilled from their missionary and coagulated on the kitchen floor of that little stone house. Red blood, the same colour for everybody, whether it was shed in all its richness and power on a hill in ancient Palestine or amongst the hills of the Flinders Ranges. There's power in the blood, alright.

The sun is just a gleam peeping over the top of *Arta-wararlpanha*, and then it is gone, as the eyelid of night shuts on the crowd by the grave. It is not long before the cooking fires are winking in the darkness, and all are safely held in their light. That is when the white light of headlights sweeps uncertainly from the Copley road to pull up before the small three roomed cottage that will be Monty's home during his visit.

### **Mountford-Sheard collection, Mortlock Library, Adelaide 2001**

The librarian who looks after the collection has decided to allow me to read Mountford's field notes. During my first phone call, she quizzed me about my purposes, and my

connections within the Adnyamathanha community. She was aware the journals contained sensitive cultural and men's information, and had been asked to guard the collection from those who shouldn't see it. The men who had entrusted this responsibility to her had since passed away: she felt the weight of it keenly. And so I approached the collection with some care.

The collection of Mountford's photographic portraits taken on his expeditions were sublime: images of the older Adnyamathanha people I had never met evoked the pride I had always imagined belonged to this community. There was even one of Nellie Driver, looking a little dishevelled, with one eye partly closed, but defiant none the less. And the people clearly returned Monty's respect, showing their game traps and string games, telling *muda* stories, and old Susie Noble, Albert's wife, illustrated most of the stories for him as well.<sup>23</sup>

Monty clearly loved the Flinders Ranges, and wrote in detail in his field journals of his drive from Copley to Nepabunna in the starlight:

...so [I] gave myself up to the beauty of the hill shapes as they showed up in the headlights, the dim outline of the hills silhouetted against a clear starlit sky, enjoying to the full the 'expanding' feeling one experiences when we leave the places where footpaths, chimney tops and tramcars hold sway.<sup>24</sup>

I knew that feeling.

But it took Monty several visits before he discovered Mrs Forbes and added her and her deceased husband to his list. That was not until his 1938 trip, when his companions Alison Harvey and Constance Ternant Cooke may have winkled her out.<sup>25</sup>

### **Nepabunna, Christmas 1936**

Winnie has sent her Joyce to bring Mrs Forbes some of the 'Christmas Cheer', and Rebecca is relieved to see at last that the cakes are rising again.<sup>26</sup> The Aborigines Department must

have heard about the weevils they'd been sending up of late. Joycey is full of news, loitering long enough for a cup of tea and perhaps a glimpse of young Jack while she's at it. Rebecca smiles.

Joycey's news is unsettling. While Mr Eaton continues his set against the old men and their ceremony, it seems that Mr Mountford is showing a great deal of interest, and had been attending with the men these last few days, much to Mr Eaton's chagrin. But it is not the rancour between these two men that worries Rebecca. It is the deepening divide in the community over whether to continue with the initiation ceremony, or not. She glances at her young Jack: he is nearly old enough to be a man, stop his shiacking, have a wife settled for him. She wanted that, as all the mothers did for their sons, despite their fear about what *Witana* would do to the *vadnapas*. They didn't really know, of course: they shouldn't, and Rebecca had never asked. It made them into men, and in her opinion, that was a good thing.

Monty is not unaware of the tensions he is feeding, and notes in the journal he keeps each night:

Before going to bed I have had a cup of tea with Mr and Mrs Eaton. These poor people are terribly distressed for fear my visit will cause the people to go back into their 'old ways.' ... Eaton is a fine type of man and is doing a deal of good here. Never preaching or speaking against the customs and ceremonies, he has nevertheless exerted a quiet pressure against them. I admire both very much. I think they feel I have been sent by the devil, nevertheless their very kindness of heart will not allow them to be anything else but considerate to me.<sup>27</sup>

The *yuras* are coming to talk to him about it too. Alex Ryan, representing the loud minority, arguing Eaton's line that the first rule was acceptable, but not the second rule, the *Wilyeru* ceremony. Monty asks what would happen to the *vadnapa*?

‘Oh’, [Alex] said, ‘the boy will have to look after that, besides the Lord will look after him...’,<sup>28</sup>

As far as Monty can make out, the opposition to the second rule has come about through miscommunication:

It appears that when the first missionary started to preach Christianity, the native mind had to find a substitute for the devil. Having nobody particularly in their mythology who was as evil as Christians painted the devil, and *Witana* the cult hero of the *Wilyeru* ceremony being the person who was most dreaded, especially by women, he was accorded the position of the devil. When the missionary started to ask about the various ceremonies, the *Wilyeru* then became ‘the devils job’.<sup>29</sup>

And *yuras* tell Monty they have to keep on side with their missionaries, lest they leave and forfeit the mission station. But the old men also say,

...we are too old to adapt ourselves to the European way. The old life has been quite satisfactory as far as we are concerned. We know that the Jews used to circumcise therefore why is it wrong for us to do so. According to our beliefs the ceremonies are necessary to protect our people from the magic of the outside tribes, make the young men keep the law and marry the right women.<sup>30</sup>

They are not convinced such things are anti-Christian. They remember Jim agreeing with them.

### **Maynard’s Well, December 2007**

The late 1930s shows a burst of enthusiasm for Indigenous peoples in Australia: Duguid, Sexton and the like press the case for Aboriginal reserves that will protect the ‘remnants’ of tribal life, and others understand such segregation to be a compassionate way to ‘smooth the pillow of a dying race.’

But the opposite issue is also causing alarm: how to manage the growing numbers of people with mixed heritage, witness to the fecund growth of an Indigenous population within White Australia. Official definitions of race fluctuate, but settle more or less into a two tiered system with policies focussed on ‘segregation’ for ‘full-bloods’ and the new term,

‘assimilation’ coined by AP Elkin in 1938, for those who are variously called half-caste, quarter-caste, octoroons, mulatto, yellafellas, mongrels, or those ‘with a touch of the tar brush.’<sup>31</sup>

Anthropologists, scientists and bureaucrats excitedly dreamt up strategies to achieve ‘biological absorption’ and achieve, eventually, a white Australia.<sup>32</sup> JB Birdsell, a Harvard University anthropologist who travelled with Norman Tindale of the Adelaide Museum, was quoted in an article titled ‘Do not isolate them – Help Them’. He claimed ‘that if every aboriginal in Australia, including full bloods, were crossed once with a white, both the aboriginal and half-caste problem would tend to disappear.’<sup>33</sup>

Fuck ’em white. Genocide, by any other name. And perhaps it would have been, had not another man, on the other side of the world, taken these theories of eugenics to their appalling logical conclusions. Adolph Hitler shocked the world into realising what an obsession with racial purity really meant. It would be a much humbler political and anthropological world after 1945. But until then, Mrs Forbes became a curio. For despite these scientific and political flights of fancy:

The provision for bleaching out the aboriginal strain is only to apply to half-caste women for the Commonwealth policy does not contemplate the intermarriage of white women with half-caste men.

There are few white women who would care to imitate the example of Desdemona in Othello where the fair white lady becomes the wife of a black man, for such a course would only end in tragedy as Shakespeare shews in his famous play...<sup>34</sup>

It is only a matter of time before anthropological and media interest turns to Mrs Forbes.

### **Nepabunna, mid 1938**

The whole camp is looking forward to Monty returning, and has been rehearsing their stories for days.<sup>35</sup> They are also keen to show him their new windmill and tank, and the way that water is piped right up to their houses.<sup>36</sup> Ted and Winnie even have the makings of an orchard beside their house.

Rebecca enjoys the lighter mood of the camp. She fills her bucket at the tap the men so kindly put in the pipe where it ran closest to her hut, and carries it back inside. It is only habit now, to keep all her billies full of water. Raymond is with the older boys, and young Jack has taken his Joycey to Beltana, now he is finally *Wilyeru*. Rebecca smiles at the thought of them. She is expecting her first grandchild in a few months, and has been picking out names she hopes they will use.

Rebecca is also looking forward to a break in the relentless silent struggle for souls that Mr Eaton has been waging in the camp. With Mr Mountford here, showing respect for the old ways, the people are reminded again that not all *udnyus* are like Mr Eaton. And old Mr Page, he didn't try and stop it.

The party arrive perched on the top of the mail truck, and Rebecca is surprised to see two women with Mr Mountford. She sees them pick her out in the group, and one of them waves to her. While they turn to gather their things, Rebecca quickly makes her way over the hill to her hut, and out of sight.

Constance Ternant Cooke and Alison Harvey find her out of course, and Rebecca feels exposed by their knowledge of her from Ernestine Hill's article, and their curiosity about her marriage and her way of life. She answers as little as she can, sends Alison off to ask Jean Coulthard about her birthing and midwife questions, and evades Mrs Cooke's offer to help



her apply for the pension. Nevertheless, Constance's report for the Aborigine's Advisory Board will include the paragraph:

One interesting person on the Station is Mrs Jack Forbes, who is an Englishwoman, born in London; she is the widow of a full-blood aborigine, and there are two H.C. sons of the marriage. The natives respect Mrs Forbes and she has been able to help them in many ways. She has lived on the native rations of flour, sugar, tea and rice, and she told me that she has often gone hungry when rabbits were scarce...<sup>37</sup>

It will also carry a handwritten gloss in the margin: 'Went to a great deal of trouble to get a pension but Mrs Forbes would not go to Marree to appear before C/W officer. I made fares available for the journey. She is a very nervous type.'

As well Rebecca might be, under the eye and interest of so many report writers. A report on her 'spick and span' home appears in Margery West's pamphlet for the UAM, 'Gems for His Crown.'<sup>38</sup> Norman Tindale pastes a newspaper article about 'Mrs Witchetty' in his field journals.<sup>39</sup> And abridged versions of Ernestine Hill's interview made their way into

Rebecca's cutting pile one way or another:

#### MRS JACKY WITCHETTY

A most unusual case of marriage between a white woman and an Australian aboriginal occurred at Bourke many years ago. The couple were an English girl named Becky Castledine and an aboriginal stockman and horse-breaker named Jacky Forbes, or Witchetty.

Forbes was a well-liked and respected worker on Wynbar station when Becky met and fell in love with him. They were married by a police magistrate with two constables as witnesses.

After the wedding the couple went to live at Broken Hill and Nepabunna (SA), where they shared a small hut in the native's camp. Two sons were born to them and these were brought up as typical natives.

Even after her husband's death Becky continued to live with the aborigines, drawing natives rations and blankets.'<sup>40</sup>

Rebecca tucks the cuttings and gossip away in the recesses of her hut, and closes her door tightly as visitors' backs recede over the hill.

### **Adelaide, 2001**

Eileen Lewis had married the Copley mailman, Mert Lewis, and worked for years in the Copley post office and later with her daughter Margaret in the store. She saw Mrs Forbes only once, when she was a very young girl. But there was plenty of talk about her at the post office.

It was a topic between people because they thought it was unusual that a white women had come out from England and married an Aboriginal, a full blood they thought he was, but I don't know if he was actually a full blood or not

....We always sort of spoke about people, things used to come up at different times you know. That was a real – how do you put it? – people spoke about that a fair bit for the simple reason that she was white, she was married to an Aboriginal and she was living their lifestyle. People couldn't sort of understand that.

...I don't know whether I should be saying things like this – but a lot of the white men had a lot to do with Aboriginal women, but on the quiet sort of thing, that nobody was supposed to know about. I mean there was a lot of children born to Aboriginal women that were fathered by white men, but as to marry them, they didn't do that then.<sup>41</sup>

When I asked Keith Nichols what he remembered people saying about Mrs Forbes, he was to the point: 'Well it was thought to be bloody weird in those days.'<sup>42</sup>

### **Nepabunna, mid 1938.**

Monty, Constance and Alison are packed and ready for the mail truck. They have attended Mr Eaton's morning church service, as a final gesture of goodwill towards him, and now the old men and some of the older women who had not attended, have come out to see them off. Mr Eaton is growing impatient with the milling crowd, wanting to call the Christians Meeting around the Lord's Table to order in the church. Monty risks one more offence. He calls out 'Can I have a photograph?' and organises the people into a line along the side wall of the church, with some sitting down the front to fit into the shot. The *yuras* are used to his camera, and oblige. Mr Eaton moves into the church, and out of the picture.

Mrs Forbes is caught up in the movement of the people, and finds herself suddenly flanked by Mrs Cooke and Miss Harvey. They smile broadly at her from under their fashionable hats, pulled down ready for the ride on top of the mail truck. For a moment, Rebecca remembers being young, like them, sitting up on the back of the dray that took the mail into Louth, hat pulled down hard against the flies, and her Jack swaying loosely across the other side of the tray. They were both full of anticipation, then.

‘Smile for the camera!’ Monty commands, and Rebecca does, straight away.



*Photograph used courtesy of Daisy Shannon*

Afterwards, Mrs Cooke kisses Rebecca lightly on the cheek, and Miss Harvey shakes her hand. Monty is calling out ‘See you next time!’ as he clambers on top of the load, and all the community, even Mrs Forbes, is waving farewell, while Eaton waits impatiently for his congregation to return to him and the Lord’s Table, in the dim church.

## **Nepabunna Office, 2001**

The new community centre at Nepabunna houses a set of copies of Mountford's photographs, and the manager has given me permission to look at them, and make photocopies if I like.

There are some portraits, and a series of thumbnails of the mission buildings, and I try to orient myself in these images, and fail. The church has been rebuilt since then, and the other old buildings pulled down long ago. Even the hills look different to me.

There is also a series of large photographs of a men's ceremony. I assume these must be the public part of the ceremony, because I have been allowed to look at them, and because I see a woman walking past the camera in one of them. Old Dick Coulthard is there, and Archie McKenzie, wearing the wide horn headdress. A young man wears a baler shell, and the men dressed in trousers and shirts standing around him sport various styles of ringers' hats as well.

These photographs must come from Charlie Mountford's fourth and final visit to Nepabunna, when he finally gets to witness a *Wilyeru* ceremony.<sup>43</sup> I can only imagine the teeth grinding that went on in the Eaton's house. But it was a time of consternation for everyone. Whether it had been decided at the time or not, this would be the last *Wilyeru* ceremony for the Adnyamathanha.<sup>44</sup> Ray Forbes, being too young and not ready, would never go through.

It was also the visit where Monty had a 'remarkable personal experience,' sitting with Dick Coulthard in a creek bed. He knew Dick was a rainmaker, but had thought no more of it. A big whirlwind approached them, threatening to send his papers flying and cover them in dust, leaves and debris. 'At that stage, the Aboriginal chanted the spell to divert the wind. To

my astonishment – and I feel sure the surprise of everyone else – the whirlwind shot off at right angles and passed about fifty yards to our right.’<sup>45</sup>

Dick remained a deeply cultural man, despite his earlier conversion to Christianity. He must have been one of those who did not return to the Lord’s Table that Eaton laid. I imagine him explaining his position to his friend Monty, with a bit of a wicked gleam in his eye,

When I hear the missionary telling the people at church about how they will go to hell if they don’t follow Jesus and live like white man, I laugh to myself, for I know that if I remain a blackfellow, I won’t go to hell, for there is none. When a blackfellow reaches *wikurtana* he is always happy, well fed and contented. If one changed over to be a Christian, he might go to hell. If he remains a blackfellow, he won’t.<sup>46</sup>

Monty’s last visit saw the end of a decade, and a millennium.

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## **Life Writing Chapter Nineteen**

### **Old *Udnyu Artu* over the hill**

#### **Nepabunna, 1940s**

Mr Page's benzine tin church is rusting to a dark brown. It is dark inside, having no opening save the door. The hessian sacking on the walls has taken up the smell of warm bodies in summer, and the smoke of fire buckets in winter. The church creaks and scrapes and has sounds of its own that its congregation can listen to during the hours of sermons, bible studies, prayers, and school lessons that take place there. Nearby, the missionaries' white washed stone houses and storerooms stand bright in the sunlight on the bare flat grey ground. Stretching away from these buildings in the direction of the creek are the 'camps': Top Camp, where Fred McKenzie sees all that goes on, and where Ted and Winnie's large cottage is surrounded by vegetable gardens and young fruit trees. Middle Camp is marked by timber framed houses where Fred Johnson and Dick Coulthard keep an eye on things, and Bottom Camp is closest to the creek where there is a little dirt amongst the rocks to smear mud on the walls to seal the small cottages. Jack Coulthard is the boss there.<sup>47</sup> Beyond Bottom Camp, over the hill, is Mrs Forbes's cottage, where it always has been. Blown about the hillsides to her left and right is the un-useable debris left from what were once her neighbours' houses, before a death or a bright idea had them move away, closer to the Missionaries. But neither of these has happened to Mrs Forbes, and so she stays where she is. Besides, her boys are both away working on the stations, and there is no one to build a new house for her, even if she wanted one.



But Mrs Forbes is not lonely, not now. Her eyesight is still good and she can write letters to her daughter-in-law Joyce via Beltana, and read the weekly replies that let her imagine her grandchildren's exploits. And she has plenty of visitors making their way to the waterhole each day. Not for water, mind you, now the mill pumped from the well to the houses, but for myriad other reasons that took them over the hill and out of sight of the missionaries.

Mrs Forbes puts the billy on for her visitors, and sits them down at her table. *Yackarties*, on their way for an illicit swim at the waterhole, ask for boiled lollies or the big square biscuits she cooks and she gives it, if she can. When she can't, they rock her roof and she comes flying out with a stick that has a switch of wire at the end, threatening to whip them with it.<sup>48</sup> And it would hurt, if she could catch them, and sometimes she does, being still lively after all. And it does hurt. Next ration day or after church on Sunday, she tells their parents and they get a hiding for giving cheek to the old *udnyu artu*.

Mrs Forbes gathers her firewood, chops it up, and sweeps bare the gravelled ground around her home. Whatever must be done to it, she does it, with a twist of wire or a knock of a hammer, or a hope and a prayer. Her hut has also rusted a dark brown, and the mud has cracked and fallen off the loose slates that are interleaved to make the lower coursing for timber framework filled in by so many flattened tin cans, arranged like scales. The chimney - also of slates glued together with mud fired hard from a thousand fires - stands wide and strong. That is the hearth that Mrs Forbes stands over, sweats over, stares into every day and every night. She keeps the home fire burning.

Mrs Forbes goes most of the week with only crumbs of news from her visitors; but on the weekend, she has her fill. On Fridays, when the shadow on the ground spells mid-afternoon, she hurries over the hill to watch the mail truck arrive. She sees the delivery of the pump

engine, she sees Eaton eagerly flipping through the mail for the envelopes he recognizes: Brother Erskine's neat hand, Department of Aborigines stamp, and then more occasionally others that have him frowning. She sees who is coming to the settlement, and who she must avoid until they leave two days or sometimes nine days later. Never longer than that. Her Ray might get a lift in too, or ride his bicycle home later that night. She always keeps something special for cooking at the end of the week for him. He does not bring much news from the Station, being a young man, but that was how she learned of the troop train collision at Copley, nevertheless.<sup>49</sup>

Saturdays she lines up for rations, and if she times her question well, will learn just what was in those letters.



*Photograph courtesy of SA Museum AA 148/1/1, Sr Hyde Collection*

'Morning Mrs Forbes,' Mr Eaton puffs, leaning over the flour sack as she passes him her bag. This is a good time, while he frowns into the sack and takes time to carefully fill the sack, not spilling any.

'Morning Mr Eaton, and how is the world with you?' He tells her, because he cannot help himself. About the knock back on the little mine he and Ted and Walter have been working at; about Balcanoona's new owners, the McLachlans and their complaints against the mission; about ration orders, and how tardy the government is with getting lavatories put on for the houses, installing the telephone, sorting out the Child Endowment payments he needs to run the Children's dormitory that was never really finished: he tells her about everything, actually. One day he is excited about getting a wireless set installed by Mr Traeger<sup>50</sup>; another time he is frustrated about police inquiries into various members of his flock. He even tells her, in more clipped phrases, of the split looming in the UAM, which bothers him no matter how much he tries to ignore it.

Sunday mornings is church, and the opportunity to chew over some of these matters with others in the camp. It is also the time when Mrs Forbes watches for those quiet signs that tell her the camp news; who is with this one, who is not talking to that one, what the old men are saying about Mr Eaton and ceremony now. Then the mail truck comes through, and collects the bags of various mining efforts that the girls have sewn up so neatly during the week, and Mr Eaton's package of letters making his replies. Ray might hitch a ride back down the track, and as the dust settles again in the tyre tracks, Mrs Forbes returns to her hut to clean up after her son, and set her home for the coming week.

Mrs Forbes is still roused, night or day, when a baby is on its way, and she still takes her old carpet bag with her. She still has her ways, like with young Ian Demell, born without a

breath in him, who she slapped into life and rubbed at with hot flannels until his pale skin was pink, the way it always was for *yura* babies.<sup>51</sup>

Then there are the funerals in the dark church. One by one her friends pass away, and she thinks of their long life together, and sings of a ‘green hill far away’ and imagines meeting again on ‘that beautiful shore’, while she knows that an increasingly small knot of people will be attending to the burial hidden in the gullies, where *yuras* continue to put their *wilyeru* men to rest.<sup>52</sup>

### **UAM Archives, Melbourne, 2003**

All was not plain sailing for the UAM in these years. Mr Gerard incorporates the United Aborigines Mission (SA), with doubtful approval from its parent body, and proceeds to take possession of all the mission properties in South Australia.<sup>53</sup> Loyalties waver: Violet Turner’s successor, Mr Erskine leaves Mr Gerard to write his own correspondence for a time, until by the late 1940s, blind Pastor Samuels agrees to the painstaking task of weekly correspondence with the unsettled and often disgruntled staff in the field. Mr Eaton was one of those, complaining colourfully of the many short-lived assistant missionaries sent to ‘help’ him. And they complained about him too, but to no avail. The Adelaide office has learnt some hard lessons about managing missionaries.

### **Government House, Adelaide, 1944**

Balcanoona’s new owner BH McLachlan also writes complaints regularly. First it is the Nepabunna goats invading their Ookabulina well. Understandable in a drought, and the Nepabunna well has failed again, but Eaton denies the charge. Gerard has the hide to apply for the Ookabulina Well’s inclusion in the mission bounds. Not surprisingly, he is refused,

again.<sup>54</sup> Next McLachlan's complains about the donkeys, and the dogs.<sup>55</sup> The new Secretary of the Aborigines Board and successor to both Reverend Sexton and Chief Protector McLean in the amalgamation of those roles, Mr William Penhall, manages the traffic of correspondence, including a note from the Surveyor General reminding McLachlan of the rent subsidy he receives for hosting the mission. This is little comfort: McLachlan estimates he has 'lost' one thousand sheep in the past three years, and accuses the mission folk of stealing them.<sup>56</sup> McLachlan puts the case to close the mission: the families should be on the stations, as labour, he argues.

The UAM rises to defend its flock:

...there are among our Natives some as honest and truthful as there are among other sections of the community that are not Natives, and we say very emphatically that such a thing could not possibly be done by the Natives without the knowledge of the Missionary, not even to the extent of 26 sheep a year, much less 8 times that number.<sup>57</sup>

But for all his righteous indignation, Eaton might not know everything.

### **South Australian Education Department Aboriginal Studies Field Trip, Angorichina near Blinman, Flinders Ranges, 2003**

Buck McKenzie was probably too ill to be leading the field trip of eager teachers I joined, but he did it in style, anyway. We were all waiting for the sun to go down, and for the time Buck would have a guitar thrust upon him, and start singing. But there was another story I wanted to hear him tell first, that I heard originally on a tape recording he had made with Vince Coulthard and Pauline McKenzie on an earlier field trip. It was the one about McLachlan's sheep.

The missionaries used to keep sheep but they wouldn't let Aboriginal people keep sheep. But every Sunday, while the missionaries were all at church, some of the men would go

out and shoot some roos, and shoot some sheep through the fence, and carry the mutton back inside the roos to camp, so they got mutton too.<sup>58</sup>

I loved this story even more when I read the correspondence between McLachlan and the mission. Whitefellas, good and bad, didn't know the half of it.

### **Aborigines Protection Board, Adelaide 1944**

Penhall administers the still relatively new Aborigines Act Amendment Act, of 1939, which includes the broadest definition yet of Aboriginality – ‘all persons descended from the original inhabitants of Australia’ – and consequently a system of exemptions from the said Act that declared ‘that the aborigine will cease to be an aborigine for the purposes of this Act.’<sup>59</sup> It is up to Penhall to determine if an aboriginal person is of sufficient ‘character and standard of intelligence and development’ to ‘assimilate’, as he hoped they would do.<sup>60</sup>

Except of course via a sexual relationship: the Act forbade miscegenation between white men and Aboriginal women.<sup>61</sup> Its silence on miscegenation between white women and Aboriginal men was not tacit acceptance; such a situation was beyond contemplation. Social assimilation, not biological assimilation, was the flavour of the new time.

### **Maynard's Well, December 2007**

It made sense that, with assimilation taking shape in policy and practice, Eaton would renew his attempts to persuade *yuras* to abandon their ceremony.

NEPABUNNA (Report for 1947)

Mr Eaton reports as follows:

Dear praying friends,

I do not just know how to start this report...

At Nepabunna, the hardest part of the years work comes at Christmas time and it was especially hard this year, not so much for what we had to do, but, the Spiritual warfare. It was a heartbreak to us to know that all our people went to an initiation ceremony, all

except those that had been baptized, we praise God for them. But our people all left the camp at dark and we didn't know they had gone until we saw them coming back next morning. They kept this up for nearly a week and as each day went by they seemed to get more miserable, that is what it looked like to us, all the joy of the Lord had given place to the Spirit of evil.

But as the people have been told 'God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap,' all those that went to that corroborree ground, they will have the price of their sin, and only the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse from all sin...<sup>62</sup>

What surprised me, although maybe it shouldn't have, was that the old men made a complaint to the policeman at Beltana when Mr Eaton tried to prohibit the initiation ceremony they wished to perform on some of the young men. The policeman, upholder of the law, wasn't sure what to make of the matter, and so wrote to Mr Penhall seeking a decision 'as to whether or not the initiation ceremony may be performed.' So finally it has come to this.

#### **Department of the Aborigines Protection Board, Adelaide January 1948.**

Mr Penhall is enjoying the relative quiet in the Government offices in these days after New Year celebrations. He knows it will not last for long. But for the moment, he can give some thoughtful attention to what has, after all, become a pivotal issue across Australia. Should the natives continue initiation ceremonies, or not. The position he arrives at borrows more from Social Darwinism, than either of the arguments for segregation or assimilation.

I think the case may be stated generally in this way.

While living under strict tribal conditions there is little doubt that the initiation ceremony was an important religious rite and influence in the life of these people, particularly with regard to the authority of the old men of the tribe.

As the natives become detribalized, the authority of the old men diminishes proportionately, and no doubt the desire of the old men at Nepabunna is to retain the authority enjoyed by their forebears.

In the process of detribalization, the time must eventually come when the younger generation of natives passes from tribal control to the control of the State with its laws and usages.<sup>63</sup>

He then suggests Mr Eaton discusses the matter with the men of the camp, and find out who wants to continue initiations, whether the young men want to be initiated and whether there is advantaged to be gained by allowing the old men to retain some control, or if the younger generation are 'advanced sufficiently towards the European way of life to be able to enter into the ways of the white man if the tribal practices are abandoned?'<sup>64</sup>

Penhall is pleased with such a reasonable position. He imagines Eaton dealing with the novelty of a discussion of cultural practices with the men themselves. He forgets that Mr Eaton has lived with the men and women at Nepabunna for the last twelve years without furlough, and that their communication patterns are well entrenched. That is why this time the matter has come directly to him.

Mr Eaton replies by return mail, and Mr Penhall smiles to see two closely type-written pages. Perhaps there is a God after all, he thinks to himself. He fetches himself a cup of coffee, and settles at his desk to read it.

Dear Sir

...I don't interfere with the natives in their tribal way, I let the work of the Gospel which I preach do that.

...Three years ago the men had a court and afterwards I was called to it, and they had been talking about carrying the first rule which is the initiation and they asked me if I would give them my permission to have the first rule, and my answer to them was 'if you can take the Lord Jesus Christ on the corroboree ground without bringing shame on Him, that is my permission.

Well they had the corroboree and a rough Christmas is was and a few weeks later a full blood native came to me and said 'Look Mr Eaton you know all the Christians went to the corroboree and they cannot have that rule without the devil being there,' so I kept that in my heart for future reference.

Next Christmas.... A number of young people over the age of 21 year had left the Mission and had been married in the white way and so the men saw that their power to hold the young couples was gone with result that they had many courts on this question.

...Now the next year, which was last year, the questions came up about initiation ceremonies and a court was held at the conclusion I was called up and they asked me if



they could have the first rule. ...Then one man said, 'but you gave your permission for us to have the first rule and why are you against it now?' I said, 'I am not against it for those that are not Christians because they have nothing else and as for saying that I gave my permission, I have no power to stop you or to tell you to do it, I did not give my permission two years ago; but what I did say was if you could take Christ to the ground and not shame Him, that is my permission, but you did shame Him for you had a representative of the devil there, therefore the Christians did wrong.

Now there were Christians and unbelievers there, so I said I would like to talk to the Christians in the morning and the result of that meeting decided that they would not go on to the ground, and I did not tell the people that they could not go. Now this year about a month before Christmas, Ted Coulthard had a long talk about this to me on this question and I feel that he was convinced that a Christian shouldn't go and then Fred Johnson and Dick Coulthard had a long talk about it with me but this was not as the mouthpiece of the men there was no courts or anything this year, so how they can say that I forbid them to have the first rule, I don't know. This report will give you a good idea of how they are viewing this thing and I might add that this Christmas was the best Christmas that I have spent at Nepabunna, everybody was happy, and God blessed us in a wonderful way.

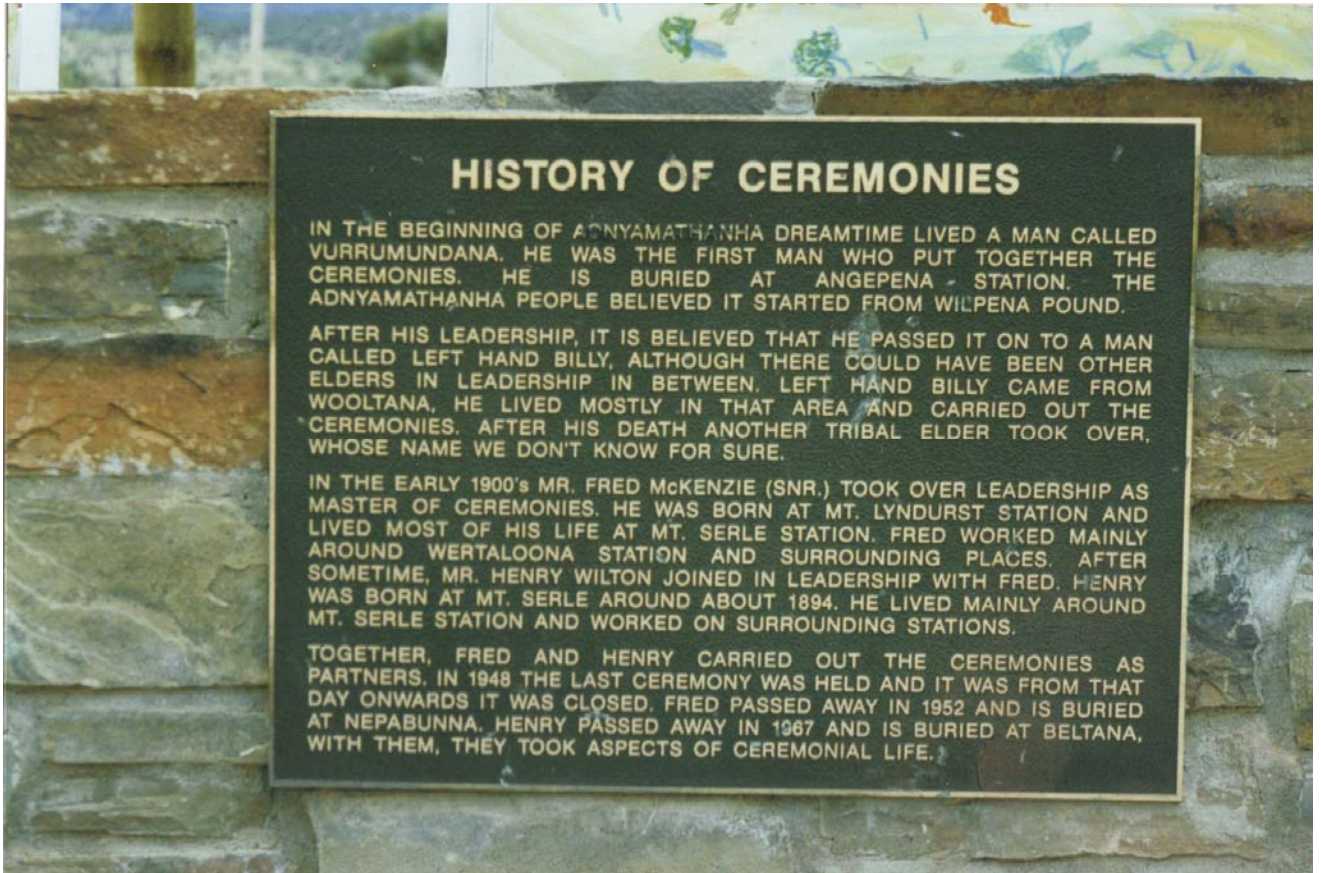
Trusting that this report will give you the information that you need.

Yours Sincerely

F. Eaton<sup>65</sup>

### **Nepabunna, 2006**

I have remembered to take photographs of the plaques that commemorate Ceremonies at Nepabunna. They are mounted in the foreground of a mural of contemporary *yura* faces and the animal totems and landscape forms of *muda*, in the central town common area of the settlement, where they are seen every day by residents and visitors. The plaque that describes the History of Ceremonies has a conversational tone that belies the weight of its authority.



*Photograph courtesy of Tracy Spencer at Nepabunna park.*

I have seen a photograph of serious faced *yuras*, women and men, sitting cross legged on the ground inside a white calico tent, at a meeting where Fred McKenzie is said to have decided to 'close' the ceremonies. His grandson, Ken McKenzie, tells the story:

He said to all the leaders – [this is] what Dad said [and] even what my Uncle said – 'Look we got Christianity here today' and he – my Grandfather – said 'I'm thinking about what is best about the Lord you know'. And he closed it. He said, 'We've got to think about [it], I've got to think about the Lord too'. Now that hurt a lot of tribal [people]. I mean today a lot of people reckon he did wrong; some people said 'Why did he close it?' But Grandfather must of knew: I mean he held the highest position [because] Left Hand Billy gave him everything, and so did Mount Serle Bob. I mean he had the authority. ...There must have been something that Grandfather closed it for. I still don't know why he closed it for, but he did. He said 'From now it's closed'.

...He used to talk to Dad: you know I was sitting [listening], I was only about 13 at the time. But he said 'Yes, no, I did the right thing by closing the *Mulkara*'.<sup>66</sup>

The fractures in the community around this issue ran deep, in myriad branches and allegiances that were new and ancient. When Peggy Brock interviewed *yuras* about it in the 1980s, Clem Coulthard and Rufus Wilton blamed the missionaries; Elsie Jackson, Roma Wilton and John McKenzie claimed it was the *yura*'s choice.<sup>67</sup> Buck McKenzie, another of Fred's grandsons, said:

The reason old Fred McKenzie, my grandfather, said to finish the *mulkara*, because people were saying secrets and things they shouldn't talk about when they were drinking. And the women didn't like it, they wanted to be the missionary way. So he said 'Oh well, better finish it, go the white man way.'<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps the young people themselves precipitated the change, questioning the marriage laws and leaving the mission to marry for love, not law.<sup>69</sup> But whatever role Fred Eaton played in all this, he was correct in one thing: he never had authority over *mulkara*. Only the *yuras* had that, and their leaders exercised it in order to renew Adnyamathanha culture for the future.

## **Nepabunna 2001**

Granny Gertie misses the *mulkara*.

'Oh it is sad, it is sad. It is sad for me when I think about it. Tch, tch tch. True.' She lingers on this last word, like a soft howl.

'What were the things that made people decide to stop that?' I ask.

'There were not many people, see. And [some are] trying to bring it back, but they're not going to bring it back now. There's only Artie Wilton around and he can't talk and they've got to have more than him. You've got to have about 12, or 18 or 15 men: 15 *wilyeru* men

and about 16 *vadnapas*. Then they'll do those things. [But] nothing here, [there] are only boys here, and boys can't do boys. No, that's no good.'

### **Alice Springs, 2008**

Artie Wilton, the last surviving *Wilyeru* man, passed away 23 March 2003. My then husband Rev Murray Muirhead led the funeral service, in the fawn coloured rectangular brick church that Mr Eaton had built in the 1950s to replace Jim's tin-can church. Immediate family and government officials filled the named and narrow pews; I stood outside, part of the large crowd. It must have been chilly: photographs taken that day show me wearing a long black leather coat. I think I must have had my children with me.

I never spoke to Artie about these things. Ten years before his death, he suffered a stroke that affected his speech, and made conversation difficult. One of his friends recalled 'looking out of her window on the day that Artie suffered his stroke and seeing the kingfisher bird making a lot of noise.'

Now, reading the funeral eulogy Murray has emailed to me, and seeing Artie's ruddy face smiling at me from my photo pin board in the hallway, I wish I had known him better.

The funeral liturgy invited those gathered to mourn the loss of the man, and the loss of the traditions he took with him. At his graveside in the general cemetery at Nepabunna, women wailed and we all refrained from throwing dirt on the grave as we listened to the final strains of the song his family chose, 'He done us proud.' But the funeral was not only a time of loss. Murray's homily reflected on the reading from Revelation, where John describes his vision of a new heaven and a new earth and the renewal of all creation that God will bring. 'This vision includes the renewal and restoration of the cultures of the world,' he declared.

The death of the last *Wilyeru* man is a very sad, historic moment in the life of the Adnyamathanha people. Like us, God is grieving today at the passing of this old man and the traditions he carried. But God also holds out for us the promise of a time when that which is lost will be restored and renewed.

... The death of the last *Wilyeru* man does not mark the death of the Adnyamathanha community or of its culture. As you continue to teach your children about your ancestors, your stories, your language and your survival, you honour the spirits and lives of the old men and women who are now gone.

...Today is a day of sadness but it is also a day of hope. Because hundreds of you have gathered to show your ongoing respect for your culture as well as your grief at the passing of this very significant old man.

...May God bless this community in its on-going life and keep you proud of the wisdom and life-giving nature of the culture into which you were born.<sup>70</sup>

After prayers for those who were grieving, we sang 'There's a land that is fairer than day' and believed again that 'bye and bye' we would reach God's land, if we weren't there already.

### **Port Augusta, 1990**

Adele Pring from the South Australia Education Department had an interview with Artie Wilton before his stroke.

That time was good but now they're all the time drinking. Everything gone to the pack. If they had the law, one law, they'd be doing good. Kids would be going good. Kids walking around now would be well looked after. People would be glad of it. Same as the police guard the white people, you know what I mean. I could come from Copley and grab these kids here and I'll be getting into trouble. The police would be into me see. In those times we could give our kids a hiding when kids get cheeky with the old people, any kids see. These days if you hit the kids, they ring up the police and you could be in trouble, right? ...I'd like the future to be my way, better, don't get into trouble. I'd like to see that come back but you can't get it back. That's why it should get put down on paper. If I could read and write, I could put that all on paper. I could send it down and make money on it. I could make good money on that if I wrote it all down. I could give it to the police. They keep a black book in their pocket, I could carry a book too. I got my law.

## **Gladstone, 2002**

Enice was only a child when she saw her first, and the last, ceremony. But listen to her. She lowers her voice, and says:

‘This is very important.’ Wait for the next bit.

‘It should have continued because it sort of kept people under control. It really controlled people, men and women.’ Now, lean closer, for she is whispering:

‘This is really important.’ Wait.

‘Until the day you died. You followed those rules until the day you died.’<sup>71</sup>

## **Nepabunna, June 1948**

Mrs Forbes watches Mr Eaton’s tall frame perched uncomfortably on her bowyang chair, leaning into the corner post of her hut. The post is scored with countless nail holes where wire arrangements and fastenings over the past eighteen years have left their mark. The post leans a little, but is solid, still. The hessian material of the bowyang’s seat has stretched and become threadbare. In places its stitching around the smooth branch frame has pulled gaps in the fabric. Mr Eaton shifts often, trying to balance his weight onto the frame. He leans forward to take some weight through his arms, resting on the rough wooden table top. It has not worn well, he thinks. But neither has he. He is stiff each morning until the weak winter sun can drive the chill of night from his bones. He is still fit and wiry, but moves more slowly these days.

Mrs Forbes, sitting opposite him, could be a hundred, he thinks. She has shrunk into herself, although her eyes are bright as ever under the brim of her hat. She is clean, if not scrubbed, and her hut has taken on the scent of soft and thin elderly skin, dry with the

powdered resin of secreted sweat and dab-dry urine. Everything is neat, he thinks, noting the news clippings on the walls, the wood stacked along one wall, the tin cups and pots hanging from the post beside the chimney, the camp oven and stirring spoon on the woodstove top. If he visited more often, he would see that little has moved from day to day, and week to week.

Mrs Forbes waits, as she always does, for her visitors to announce themselves. But she is surprised when he starts on the reason for his visit.

‘I think Mrs Cooke told you about getting on the Age Pension?’ Mr Eaton is blunt, as ever, and Mrs Forbes holds her face still while she absorbs it, and searches her memory. At last the memory comes: kind Mrs Ternant Cooke and that young university girl. She had completely forgotten about the pension. Eaton, seeing Mrs Forbes brow clear, continues.

‘I received those forms in the mail that Mr Bray from the Aborigines Protection Board promised to send up.’ Ah, Mrs Forbes knew about him. Another weekend visitor, meeting with this one and that, trudging past her hut to inspect the windmill his department had finally supplied, walking slowly around the vacant dormitory building, and the foundations of what he was told would be a school, although everyone knew Mr Eaton wanted it for his new church. He was even building a tank for baptisms into its floor.

‘He says you’re eligible for the pension and has sent these up for you.’ Mr Eaton produces a thin sheaf of papers that he smooths out on the table in front of Mrs Forbes. She gets up quickly from the table and opens the front door wider, letting the light fall upon the table. She sits down again and leans over the papers. At last she speaks, her voice brittle from little use, but her cockney vowels as strong as ever.

‘Doesn’t say I got to leave here, does it?’

‘No, no it doesn’t Mrs Forbes – ‘ Mr Eaton is about to say more, but stops himself. ‘Means you can get cash, a money order to spend at the store, instead of rations.’ He can see she is looking alarmed, so he adds ‘Some of the other elderly people here are applying as well, Mrs Forbes.’ She relaxes then, sits back in her chair and finishes the last of her cup of tea. Mr Eaton is fussing at his shirt pocket, until a somewhat chewed pencil is fished out. Mrs Forbes offers him her knife where it lies beside the cooking range, and he wittles the blunted lead into a point. ‘Did you want to fill it out, then, Mrs Forbes? I can do it otherwise.’

‘Oh, I’ll be fine,’ says Mrs Forbes, allowing her eyebrows to rise a little at the thought of Mr Eaton’s handwriting. It is harder for her to form the letters these days, but they loop in generous circles along the lines of the forms nevertheless. Name, address, age – she could not truthfully remember, but put down ‘70’ anyway. Widow. She signs her own name, and hands the pencil and papers back to Mr Eaton, who is standing, stretching his legs.

‘I trust Mr Bray had a good visit with you, Mr Eaton?’

‘Hmm? Yes, yes he seems to have.’<sup>72</sup> Sending up some frigoplas for the dormitory tank, and I think he was sorting out the trouble in Copley. Department of Lands has forbidden camping on the common, so we might see some of the families coming back to us. Coulthards are back already. Your Ray might think of it too, perhaps?’ Mr Eaton looks at the older woman, who nods noncommittally at him.

‘I think he’s chasing work at that coal field,’ is all she says, and waits for Mr Eaton to continue.

‘I think Mr Bray also made it clear to the old men that it is time they gave up control of the young ones through their old ways, don’t you agree, Mrs Forbes?’ Mrs Forbes continues to look back at him, politely, but does not answer. A heavy breath escapes Mr Eaton. ‘At any rate, Fred Johnson told him that the young Jackson boy could go ahead and marry the Wilton



girl, as long as they keep away from the mission for a time.' Mr Eaton is frowning. 'I think they will get married in Port Augusta. No good having that here, with the way things are.' He is referring to the muttering and sadness in the camp, the way the older men are a little more hunched over, and the way those who watch them, frown and cannot meet their eyes. Mrs Forbes feels this, and like the others, says nothing, to no one. After all, the decision is made. And in the vacuum, no one knows who could talk about it anyway.

Mr Eaton stands straight, and makes ready to go, slapping the papers against one hand.

'I'll get them in the post for you, Mrs Forbes.' Mrs Forbes remains seated. She feels numb, now it has come to this. Times are changing, and she must change too. Her Ray did not manage to come home so regularly now he was camped at Copley, and Jack had his family to feed, so the extra money would come in handy, she supposed. And if the others were applying too... she must ask Winnie if she and Ted were getting it.

Mr Eaton's gaunt frame is silhouetted in the doorway. He turns back to Mrs Forbes, and his face is dark in the light. 'Mailman said he'd seen Ray back in town. Doesn't think he'll be coming out this weekend, he said to tell you.' Mr Eaton's lips are pursed, but Mrs Forbes can only hear the disapproval in his voice. 'Some of the other lads came in for an early weekend from the stations, and they have all been drinking, it seems. You might want to have a word with your boy when he next comes in. Good day Mrs Forbes.'

'Good day Mr Eaton.' When the door is closed behind him, Mrs Forbes shoulders slump and her breath escapes in a small puff. She frowns, thinking of her youngest son. Twenty-four years old, and keenly aware he might never be the man his brother was, or his father had been. He would be *vadnapa* forever. Talk was there would be no rules this Christmas. Ray had no promised wife, being an outsider, and the elders had not chosen one for him, being

only *vadnapa*. Her eyes narrowed. And he would not want to find his own wife, not after the uproar young Frank Jackson and Joan Wilton had caused. Frank was only *vadnapa*, like Ray. She didn't know what the future held for her Ray. She only hoped it would be more than what he saw in the murky brown depths of a bottle.

### **State Records of South Australia, Netley 2003**

I am reading through what seems a miscellaneous collection of issues discussed back and forth between Nepabunna mission and the Aborigines Protection Board. It seems that Mr Eaton did not send in Mrs Forbes's application for a pension until August that year, recommending in his covering letter that 'this lady will get this greatly needed assistance as she deserves.'<sup>73</sup> Mr Penhall also adds his recommendation, writing:

...[she] is well known to me, although not under the control of the Aborigines department. I have seen Mrs Forbes on several occasions, and I estimate her age to be at least 70 years. She is receiving rations from this department only as a temporary measure, and the issue will be discontinued if and when the Pension is granted. Mrs Forbes is a woman of good character and I strongly recommend that her application for an Age pension be granted.<sup>74</sup>

I chuckle at the eighteen years of 'temporary' rations the Department had made available to Mrs Forbes, and wonder just how uncomfortable Penhall felt about the presence of a white woman on one of his Aboriginal settlements.

I also wonder how uncomfortable Mrs Forbes must have felt when she learned that the claim by old Richard Coulthard – Rambler - for the Age Pension was rejected just a few months later, on the grounds 'You are living on a settlement used for aboriginal natives of Australia.'<sup>75</sup> Whitefella law is a fickle thing.

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## Life Writing Chapter Twenty

### In the Sweet Bye and Bye

#### Nepabunna, March 1949

It is ration day, and Mrs Forbes is hurrying to spend her pension. She is bent over against the dust being whipped in eddies about her, and is clasping an assortment of bags: one for tea, one for flour, one for sugar, and one for rice or sometimes tins of meat. Rains have scattered the wild meat who can find their water in any crevice now and not just the waterhole, and even the occasional 'found' mutton the men smuggle into camp has become a rarity; McLachlan's campaign against the mission means they dare not be caught.<sup>76</sup> There had not been any tinned meat in the store last week either, and Mrs Forbes feels a weakness in her bones.

Watch her tiny figure – she has always been short and slight – in its long dress and pulled down felt hat, rapping short steps along the dusty pad from her hut to the store.

Mrs Forbes does not tarry at the store: see her toiling back the way she came, her bags swinging in rhythmic disjunction with their unequal weights. Over the hill she labours, out of sight.

In the dark of her hut, Mrs Forbes arranges her things, and herself, as she always does. She stands before the camp oven on the hob, the way she always does, not too close, not too far, stirring the small lump of meat in its milky soup, listening to the small slapping sounds of liquid on the side of the pot, and the soft crash of insects landing on her roof. The wind keeps up a slow click and rush through the trees and mess in the creek beyond. Of course Mrs

Forbes hears the scrape and thud of feet approaching, and the knock on her closed door, but she makes no move, until she hears the voice.

‘It’s Clara, Mrs Forbes, come for a visit.’ Making no sound, Mrs Forbes moves the few feet to open the door, and greets the daylight and the girl with a pleasant smile.

‘Come in, dear. I’ll put the billy on.’

### **Colebrook Community, Quorn, 2002**

Aunty Clara still lived at Colebrook Community on the outskirts of Quorn, where she had grown up in the care of the UAM, and received an education that led to a career in teaching. Her first posting was Nepabunna for the UAM. As a young single woman, she lived in the mission house with the Eatons, but told me how she found refuge in the stories and company of Mrs Forbes.<sup>77</sup>

...it was very interesting when I did go there and realise there was this little white lady living all on her own over the hill – or over the rise – from the rest of the community. It was very interesting because I used to go and sit and spend hours with her, talking with her and that. And the stories that she did tell me, of about what London was like, and England, and you know, the cobbled streets and the buggies. She realised then she was thinking those sorts of things were still there in those years, that was 1948 then. But she was years and years behind the time and changes of those years from when she left those. She used to tell me that. I couldn’t understand: she must have had a great heart for adventure. She said that when she was in England that she had that desire to come out to Australia. She came out as a nursing person.<sup>78</sup>

The older woman’s sense of adventure clearly had an impact on Clara.

Yes and when she came out, she did tell her other friends that she was going to go and marry a full blood Aborigine man...To me she looked at people as being people, not really even considering that she was a white woman and her husband and her boys were little bit different to her. She was a person like that.

...Yes, yes there was a challenge. I know at that time when she was telling me all this I was thinking ‘Oh goodness!’ The thought came to me ‘You’re a very special person.’<sup>79</sup>

Clara remembers Mrs Forbes having a beautiful rocking chair, with tapestry upholstery on the back, and an old trunk in which she kept her treasures. One day she pulled out a tiny pistol from the trunk to show to Clara. It was no bigger than a toy. Another time she told her about how she hurried women along when they gave birth, standing up holding onto a table, to force the birth. The old lady's graphic descriptions scared the young woman. But Mrs Forbes carried on, regardless, reveling in a rare audience for the tales and stories she kept in her head, of the journey that had delivered her into this close, dark home in Adnyamathanha *yarta*.

### **Nepabunna, March 1948**

Clara has tidied away their tea things, to save Mrs Forbes the bother, and is preparing to leave and return to the chores Mrs Eaton will have waiting for her by now. Mrs Forbes watches the young woman, grateful for her efficient kindnesses.

'Those *yakarties* were throwing rocks on my roof again, and tell them I know who they are. They'll be getting a hiding, by and by.' Mrs Forbes frowns a little. The rocks scare her, breaking her silence, and she does not like to open the door these days to see the culprits. She cannot remember the names of many of the youngsters now; and often as not their parents were away working, anyway. There were less than forty adults in the camp now, and maybe thirty children that Clara tried to teach. It was not like the old days.

Clara nods, feeling the old woman's fear.

'Well I'll get them at school, so they can watch out for that, too, we'll tell them.

Meanwhile, you rest those bones, Mrs Forbes,' she says, as she closes the door behind her.



*Drawing by Margaret Brown. Used with permission.*

Inside and alone, Rebecca sits in her rocking chair, and her thoughts meander back along the forty years of her journey, pausing to visit, here and there, and arriving, again and again, in the England she left behind.

### **SS Oruba, 1908**

....The majestic pace of the long low dark liner Oruba has slowed to stalling when Becky hands the letter she has quickly sealed and addressed to the thin clergyman waiting on the deck, who places it in his satchel with all the others and prepares to embark the pilot boat chafing to get about its business back upstream now they had reached Deal. Becky is crying,



as are many others grasping the ships rail, half shut eyes brimming and watching their country slide away from them as they move into open waters with a mist of spray clinging to the fine hairs of their cheeks. All she could say to her sisters until whenever she might chance upon a mailman, was in that slender envelope she had surrendered. They would hear her sadness in her words, she was sure, but they would never see her face shining with tears and salt spray.

*...Thank you for your goodbyes. I didn't expect to be able to take Mother's Rocking Chair, but am grateful you could pay the steward to arrange it...*

### **Nepabunna, 1950**

At the start of the new year, Fred Eaton is writing his weekly missive to Pastor Samuels in the UAM office in Adelaide. 'There was no corroborree,' he types in conclusion, missing the end of the line as he tries to fit the final word on the page and cheat the typewriter's return carriage. He curses the contraption that Samuels has arranged for his use, in the mildest terms.

Fred is struggling with changes of his own. Federal UAM has modified its practice as a 'faith mission', and is suggesting that missionary staff be put on wages! Mr and Mrs Eaton, who have lived through decades of poverty that they can only rationalise as 'God's will', cannot abide a change in 'God's Will' at this late juncture. Fred throws his lot in with Mr Gerard's UAM(SA) Inc. , and ceases to belong to the national movement that has been his home for twenty years.

### **Farina, Northern Flinders Ranges, February 1950**

Mounted Constable Geary is busy. The once thriving government town of Farina on the Ghan rail line has dwindled to stubborn shop keepers, a railway siding, police station and several old timers. It does not even warrant a ration station. But the requirements of the Aborigines Act Amendment Act, 1939 require MC Geary to track the movements of increasing numbers of ‘persons’ who have qualified for Exemption certificates and are moving about the country following work and living on the fringes of towns and requiring constant vigilance lest they break the conditions that have so provisionally made them ‘cease to be an aborigine.’ They might drink, they might commit an offence, they might associate with ‘aborigines’. He tracks those too, who, while not exempt, require special permits to travel beyond the supervision of their mission or reserve.<sup>80</sup> And he is the first port of call for those in his District wishing to apply for Exemption from the Act.

Rufus Wilton was the first Adnyamathanha person to apply for an Exemption certificate, commonly called ‘the dog tag.’ He moved his family out of the Nepabunna Mission and into the township of Beltana. The policeman advised him to apply for the Exemption, in order for his children to attend the school there. He worked at the Leigh Creek coal field for ETSA for the next thirty years, riding his pushbike home to his family on the weekends.<sup>81</sup> Others followed, living in fringe camps or sometimes house blocks in towns like Farina, Copley, Beltana, Hawker and Port Augusta. It meant their children could go to the state schools, they could choose work they wanted, and they could drink at the pubs. Other *yuras* decided not to be exempt:

‘Permits meant that you resign from living the way you live like an Aboriginal. They wanted their drink but they should’ve got the drink and shouldn’t have had to resign from being Aboriginal. I never had a permit,’ said Lynch Ryan.<sup>82</sup>

'If you had an exemption card you couldn't go back to Nepabunna. You was in white society,' said Murray Wilton.<sup>83</sup>

'We were exempted. During that time we didn't bother to go to Nepabunna. You would have had to have a permit to get in there,' added Pearl McKenzie.<sup>84</sup>

Jack Forbes Jnr is working at the Flinders Talc Mines near Lyndhurst and his family are camped there also, when he decides to apply for an exemption from the Act. He drives his utility into Farina, and pulls up at the police station. After a lazy introduction on the verandah and exchanging some news, Jack explains his business. MC Geary ushers him inside, offers him some lined paper and a pen, and Jack writes his appeal to Mr Penhall.

...I only go to the mission about every two years. I do not mix much with my own people. I have a wife, one daughter and two sons. I am employed as bench-hand mechanic, truck driver etc at the above address. I am a half-caste and well known to Farina Policeman.<sup>85</sup>

MC Geary blots the page for Jack, and tucks it into the internal mail folder to be sent to the Aborigines Protection Board. But Penhall will wants to know more, about his wife's 'aboriginal blood', and his relationship to 'intoxicating liquor', and MC Geary posts another letter:

I presume you know that the applicant's mother is a white woman who came from England and married a full blooded aborigine, and, as a result of the marriage, certain half-caste children were born.<sup>86</sup>

In the end, Geary writes his own reference for Jack Forbes.

Re the application of John Tilcha Forbes for an exemption. My Wife knows the Forbes well and knew their mother when she was on Yandama Station. She, my Wife, has informed me that they were well brought up.

My own knowledge of Forbes is as follows. He has been in this District, to my knowledge for at least one year. There has never been trouble of any sort with this man. He may have a drink but I have never known him to have one. I have never heard of him having a drink. He is a very clever man with cars and I believe he worked in a garage for six years. He has a wife and three children. These children and the wife are all clean and healthy. They live

in a tent at the Talc Mine and I visit them every month as I do to each Aboriginal in this District. Their tent is always clean and also the surroundings.

I have never heard ill spoken of him and have always found him decent and reasonably intelligent. I wish a lot of others, including white men, were the same in this district. I can do nothing but strongly recommend his application for an exemption and if he obtains same I will take care that his good behaviour does not deteriorate.<sup>87</sup>

Mr Penhall adds to the recommendation to the Board: 'Applicants mother is a white woman born in England but now of widowed status, living at Nepabunna. Her husband was a full blood aborigine.'<sup>88</sup>

MC Geary serves the response on John Forbes, telling him he has been granted 'a limited declaration of exemption,' and reminding him that 'He must not, of course, associate with Aborigines.'<sup>89</sup>

John takes the papers from Geary, with a nod. He knows he will need a permit now to visit his old mum, the white woman living at the Aboriginal mission, and he smiles, thinking *how he's gonna visit in the middle of the night, make that old missionary have to get up and check these silly white man papers. And maybe he'd be too sleepy to check for anything else!*<sup>90</sup>

### **State Records of South Australia, Netley, Adelaide 2003**

The level of surveillance exercised over *yuras* in the 1950s astounded me. District police, the eyes and ears of the government since the era of local 'Protectors' of Aborigines, send monthly reports to Mr Penhall detailing the employment, travel arrangements, romantic attachments and marital status of Indigenous people in their district. The people they write about have done nothing to attract the attention of the Law, apart from having any degree of Indigenous heritage. Huge amounts of government time and money have been spent glorifying gossip about people's personal lives. It is from this evidence, however, how I learn

when John leaves the talc mines, rejects the job at Myrtle Springs MC Geary has lined up for him, and instead takes a position on Mt Lyndhurst Station.<sup>91</sup> He can find his own work, but he can't visit his own mother without government permission.

### **Nepabunna, June 1950**

Kitty Elliot's death came as a shock to Mrs Forbes, although, she thought to herself, it should not have. When Kitty's brother Albert Wilton had passed away, it felt like the end of an era. But the deaths of old Kitty's children within the year, and then Alick Ryan straight afterwards, had sent shivers and whispers through the camps. They had been such staunch Christians, all of them, even in the eery silence of the *mulkara* grounds last Christmas. The deaths, like the shrugs and rumblings of the country itself, shift time around Mrs Forbes. She feels older now, and at each funeral is overwhelmed by the gaping absences along the pews. She does not walk all the way to the new cemetery, where *Mathari* and *Arruru* are buried together, 'so that the old men and their wives can rest in peace together' as Eaton says, but returns to her hut to mourn in her dry silence and lose herself in the latest serial thrillers that she cuts out from the newspapers and clips together into books, keeping them with her other treasures in the trunk that has travelled around the world with her. Her eyes are sharp as ever.

In the trunk also are all Mrs Forbes letters, bundled together. She has a fat packet from Joyce now, with a trail of postmarks that makes a map in Mrs Forbes's imagination of her boy's travels and the trail of small impressions where her grandchildren learn to walk, and run, and go to school. The letters still come weekly, although she cannot recall the last time she saw the family. She knows he got the Exemption, and is not surprised, with so many leaving the mission now for proper school, and work, and maybe a beer at the pub. It

distressed Mr Eaton – she could see that when he looked out over his dwindling congregation – but he had himself to blame, too. Fancy making such a fuss over young Rita Buckskin wearing slacks.<sup>92</sup> Talk was he had banned her from the store, and that would not go down well. That girl could stand up for herself, and didn't mind letting whoever came by know about it, too.

### **Nepabunna, September 1950**

From part way down the slope towards the Store, Mrs Forbes can see it is the new assistant, Brother Hathaway, on duty today. She decides to turn back. She will eke out what she has until the next day, when she hopes Mr Eaton will be there. She is uncomfortable with this new couple, who call one another 'brother' and 'sister' although they have been married for years, and watch Mr Eaton with some kind of concern, as the old man struggles between admonition and love for the people he has known for twenty years.

Mrs Forbes returns to her hut. Perhaps Winnie, noticing she has not come, will send some of the girls over to see her later on. She fills the big kettle from her collection of billies and hangs it over her fire. She adds two small faggots to the low flames, and waits.

### **Nepabunna, April 1951**

Mrs Forbes is lying on her narrow cot behind her hessian curtain, making muffled sounds as the tears stream down her face. She has not set her fire. She wishes she had something to hold, something to look at of *his*, but of course she had burnt them all when he died. Now the old man who had carried her dying *artu* to lie in the shade of the *vinba* was gone too. Mrs Forbes cannot bear to go to another one of Mr Eaton's funeral services. And not for this old *wilyeru*: she can only guess how it must have pained him to return to the mission to die.

Mr Eaton writes his weekly report to Pastor Samuels, late in the night as usual.

We have lost our last full Blood Aborigine Sydney Jackson, he passed away last Tuesday morning at 11 am, he had a stroke two years ago and had another a while ago, and has never been able to walk since he took ill about a week ago and just faded away. We are sorry that he made no profession. The last time I had a talk to him on spiritual things he told me that he had been serving the Devil a long time and he had always looked after him. So there was poor hope for him.<sup>93</sup>

Fred is always keen to get Pastor Samuel's letters, waiting for news that perhaps finally the UAM has secured Ookabulina from the Balcanoona lease and that he can run the cattle bought in faith on a bit more country; and trading news on the health of family members. Mrs Samuels is always poorly, and the Eatons frequently catch colds in their draughty home. Samuels is also corresponding from time to time with Ted and Florence Hathaway, Eaton's assistants at Nepabunna. For a blind man, Samuels has a very clear vision of Nepabunna indeed. It will take all of Samuels' tact – and several years – to convince his old friend to give up the reins and hand over to the young and capable Ted Hathaway, and his martinet wife, Florence. Meanwhile, Fred Eaton continues to 'pray for people for the work' while the steady procession of young male teachers beat a tattoo into and out of Nepabunna, with a familiar flurry of recriminatory letters about Mr Eaton, and by Mr Eaton, settling onto Samuels' desk each time.

### **Nepabunna, February 1952**

Pastor LJ Samuels  
Adelaide

Dear Brother in Christ

Greetings to you in his wonderful name. Thank you for your letter today. Since your writing we have heard of the sudden death of our Beloved King. What a shock it was for us as I didn't hear it until I got home from the mine and I called in the camp taking them a

kangaroo that one of our men shot and Ted Coulthard said there is sad news, so he made me wonder, and then he said the king has passed away. I said my that is sad he was a wonderful man, I have felt sorry in my heart continually for I feel that he was more than a King to us he was a real friend. May God bless the young Queen as she takes up the crown that her Father has laid down...

Yours in His Service  
F. Eaton<sup>94</sup>

### **Nepabunna, 1952**

It is a day when the wind roars constantly, and Mrs Forbes does not hear the car engine coughing as the Wertaloon Station vehicle lumbers its way unevenly towards her hill. She is sitting on an upturned box in the lee of her hut, trying to warm her bones in the spring sun. She is thinking of her old friend Winnie, buried last week, and old Fred McKenzie, gone with the winter frosts at Wertaloon. The drying wind licks at her squinting eyes, and she is beyond sorrow. She is just spending time with her memories, when she hears a car door slam shut. Mrs Forbes is on her feet, dusting down her skirt and tucking stray hairs under her hat. Young Mary Woods, the new cook at Wertaloon station, walks smiling up to the hut, with her three-year-old daughter trailing beside her and lugging a long kangaroo tail that leaves a faltering line in the dirt where it drags.

‘Afternoon!’ she calls. ‘Just stopped by for some business on our way in to Copley. My husband wants to pick up that son of yours. We’ve got some work on at the station for him. Anyway, I said give us few minutes for me to have a cup of tea with me old friend. You got the billy on there, Mrs Forbes?’

Mrs Forbes regards the young woman a moment, and her face creases into a smile. She takes the hard brown furred tail the child is pressing into her, and lets go the breath she has been holding. She is glad for Mary’s conversation today.



'I certainly have, Mrs Woods. Now come in and tell me all your news.'

The child is drawing happily at the table with a pencil and paper that Mrs Forbes has brought out for her. The enamel cups in front of the two women are empty, and they have pushed their chairs back from the table and gesture towards each other as they speak. Their conversation is animated. Mrs Forbes is enjoying the younger woman's strong and open opinions, and matches them with her own. It is so different to the quiet and circumspect conversation she has with her neighbours, knowing so well what each other will think and say after all these years. It is so different to the stern tone she keeps for the children who visit. It is so different to the crisp and curt answers she gives to the missionaries' enquiries, not wanting to attract their attention. With Mary Woods, herself so new to station life, and fussing about the kitchen she has to cope with to turn out the smokos and dinners, Mrs Forbes is again that young woman finding her way into station life, 'back 'o' Bourke', on Winbar.

'I don't know about that young Princess Elizabeth, then, and her Greek. How's that going to be then, just a Queen and no proper King, and him a foreigner!' Mary exclaims, rolling her eyes theatrically.

'But she's royal blood, don't forget, and born to it, like the old Queen. Queen Victoria. I remember her. She had her German, too. But you don't know these women! Oh, she was good to the people, Queen Victoria.' Mrs Forbes is sitting upright, a queen in her own home. Her hands lie together in her lap, and she looks straight at the younger woman.

'Oh here comes the pommy blood to the foreground!' cries Mary, eager to break the serious moment that has developed.

‘I’m not! I’m an Australian!’ They are both taken aback by the force with which Mrs Forbes speaks. She drops her gaze, watching her hands, and explains, ‘I’m an Australian Aboriginal, I’m not a pom!’<sup>95</sup>

Mary says nothing. The young child has laid down her pencil and is watching the two women now.

Mrs Forbes goes on, as much to herself as her friend. ‘I had my Aboriginal.’ She looks up at Mary, wondering what she already knows. ‘When I married, a wife takes her husband’s nationality, unless she’s a Queen.’ Mrs Forbes smiles at Mary, who is watching her carefully. ‘That makes me an Australian Aboriginal. Just about the only real white Australian there is, I told that journalist lady. Did you read about that?’ Mary shakes her head, although she is curious to read whatever might have been written about her friend. ‘Ah, well there’s a story. Do you want another cup of tea?’

‘Yes please,’ says Mary, at once, holding out her empty cup to Mrs Forbes, who has stood up. ‘What’s that story then?’ Mary asks, watching Mrs Forbes’s back as she fiddles over pouring the billy into the cups perched on the edge of the fireplace.

‘Huh. I said I would write it all down one day, but I never have.’ Mrs Forbes places the steaming cups down on the table, and pushes the sugar bag towards Mary. She sits back into her chair. ‘Well, I come out on the *Oruba*, its last voyage in fact...’

#### **UAM(SA) Inc., Adelaide, 1954**

Pastor Samuels continues his weekly missives, but with a certain persuasion to bring the Eatons time at Nepabunna to a close.

Re you folk coming down, I do pray that you won’t leave it too long I really feel you should try and get away just as soon as possible for your own sakes, you must not be silly by trying to stick it out too long, we do want you to enjoy the rest of your life with

something like good health, so be a good boy and come away soon, that sounds awful seeing we have said all the way along that we did not want you to leave, but seeing the Lord has provided for you, we must not go against His plans and thereby upset your future health, I am now being a daddy towards you don't you think, anyway somebody needs to take you in hand...<sup>96</sup>

...I feel that perhaps if Brother Hathaway could take charge now and relieve you of the responsibility and let you get on with your own packing etc and assisting Brother J with re the mine, now if you will agree just inform Brother H and he and we will know where we stand, at present I have been put to it to decide to whom I should send this to whom I should send that, it would make it clear for all concerned. Of course that would not mean take charge of you and your wife you would understand that, I don't mean to put you two under someone else but the work of the Station, then Brother H will know what to do re his plans for the future etc. I know how you must feel these days, and Brother believe me when I say I am remembering you in prayer as you make ready to leave, and I trust you won't need to stay longer than Dec 6 if you need to stay until then...<sup>97</sup>

At the same time Samuels writes to Brother Hathaway, hoping that this young man will outlast the stubborn older missionary.

...Glad Brother Eaton has agreed to let you now act as Supt and the time won't be long now before you have the field clear on your own, I realize it is not quite satisfactory at present re the house and the wireless etc, but it will soon come and all will be well I trust...<sup>98</sup>

The Eatons have devoted over twenty years of their life to living on faith and no wage, and most of that at Nepabunna. It is the end of an era.

### **Gladstone, South Australia, 2002**

I was accustomed to *yuras* sadness at the end of Mr Page's life with them, but Enis surprised me when she suddenly added:

I mean it's the same with Mr. Eaton even: 'Why did Mr. Eaton leave? He was sent there by God to look after us!' and they never ever forgave Mr. Eaton for leaving them, you know, because he was somebody special. 'Why didn't Mr Eaton stay and die with

us?'...He was there a long time with the old people. As we came along we sort of thought 'Oh yes, he's the only one that knows how to run the store'. Isn't it silly how you think as a kid; you think he's the only who knows how to stand up in church and preach to us, he's the only one that knew how to play the little mandolin or the little musical instrument. He was a father figure and what else do you say?<sup>99</sup>

Fred Eaton had been the Superintendent of the Mission for twenty years, and before that, one of the founding missionaries. He dug wells and oversaw the erection of the windmill and piping from the wells to the community, he struggled with Adnyamathanha cultural ways, tended wounds, ran Christmas Day races, preached heaven and hell from his rude pulpit and even built a new church that stands to this day. He badgered the government and the UAM for what the mission needed, he fronted McLachlan's allegations and defended the honesty and honour of the community members. He managed government monies and schooling and quarrels in the camp. Along with Ted Coulthard and others, Fred turned the barities mine into an enterprise until he had regular orders, three utilities and the young women of the Mission lined up under the lean-to verandah along the church sewing up bags of dirt to send to Adelaide. A row of prefabricated cottages called Eaton's row or the Rainbow cottages stood tribute to his endeavours to improve the standard of housing at the mission. Mr Eaton was the presence of authority at Nepabunna for two decades, and it had not always been easy. Ken McKenzie had told me once,

I was always also told that Mr. Eaton got upset once and he felt like taking his life as well. But like Harold Wilton said "Oh, Mr. Eaton, you can't do this: think about Jesus. Who's going to look after us?" Then he walked around and he said "I might as well be dead", you know. But Harold Wilton said to him "No Mr. Eaton, don't do this because you know you've got to look after us: who's going to be looking [after us]?" Then he walked back and he said "I'm sorry, you know. I guess I'm just miss my brother so much". But Mr. Eaton: I liked Mr. Eaton a lot, you know...he preached the gospel. He used to preach about hell and all this! Used to really say "If you don't give your life to the Lord you'll be judged", eh? But it was good because it stirred a lot people up, and he preached well, Mr. Eaton. But I had a lot of time for Mr. Eaton.<sup>100</sup>

Enis, still a child in the 1950s, continued,

This is my personal feeling: I thought he was the only one that knew how to run a Sunday School...and then when Mr. Hathaway came along and we went to Sunday School it wasn't the same, until we got used to it, of course. But it wasn't right. Yes, oh you know Aboriginal people are very forgiving and very unforgiving, you know. Like Mr. Eaton, he should never of left, he should of stopped there till the day they died...Yes they were like family in the mission.

...I think the people felt that when Mr. Eaton came along, because he had a family - he had a wife and family - they thought that 'Oh he'll be safe, you know. This is it: they'll stop here forever'.

If history judges Mr Eaton, I hope it will hear the respect and gratitude Adnyamathanha had for him, lying quiet behind the disappointments.

### **Druid Vale, 2002**

I was on the cordless phone to my minister friend at Jabiru in the Northern Territory, walking around the wide verandahs of my homestead at Druid Vale in the Flinders Ranges, and keeping an eye on the antics of my three year old. I sat down from time to time, resting my pregnant belly, and watching the gentle sway in the whispering needles of the Atholl pines. Dean's voice on the phone was friendly, ranging over topics he has come across in his work like a shopping trolley full of groceries.

I was talking to the old patrol minister from here the other day, and he was telling me about one of the Binning mob saying to him 'Many whitefellas come to live with us. When will one die with us?'

My heart skipped a beat. It was so true. And then my heart burned with a fierce commitment.

With my husband and children I had just bought a property twenty kilometers north of Hawker in the Flinders Ranges, Adnyamathanha country. I was home here. This was my commitment to this place, and these people. I never wanted to leave.



*Druid Vale Station 2002. Photograph courtesy of Tracy Spencer*

\* \* \* \*

### **Hawker, 2001**

Rebecca's grandson Darrell Forbes came to see me and we sat in the ATCO hut that was my back yard office at the Manse in Hawker. He showed me a slim scrapbook of pasted yellowing photocopied articles about his grandmother, narrating what he knew as he did so.

When Rebecca started to get sick, they moved her up to a corrugated iron house – bigger house – near the church, so they could look after her. I don't think she liked it for a while: she'd got used to the old place.<sup>101</sup>

I had never heard that Mrs Forbes had another home at Nepabunna. I had only ever imagined her in her hut overlooking the creek, an outpost of memory of times past while the rest of the families moved inexorably towards the mission store and church. To all appearances Mrs Forbes became the exile, living beyond the edges of the community, but those who knew said that wasn't true, that Mrs. Forbes lived at the heart of the original Nepabunna community,

from the days before the store and the church became the centre of things. She 'was quite happy to live by herself', in the life she had chosen, and been accepted into, over twenty years ago.<sup>102</sup> Amongst the ruins of that first Nepabunna settlement, her's was the only fire still burning, sending its thin plume of smoke into the air, marking that older time. To the youngsters of the community she had become 'the old lady who lived over the hill'.

But now Darrell was telling me she was moved from that place, and installed instead under the eye of the missionaries. I took the information in slowly as Darrell continued to reminisce about the kangaroo tails his family brought to her on their permitted visits, cooking the tails in the ashes the way she liked. I tried to picture Mrs Forbes in sickness, and in a corrugated iron house by the church and mission buildings, out of sight of the creek, away from the piles of stones that had been her neighbours homes, and too far away to hear growling in the teddy bear tree.

### **UAM Archives, Melbourne, 2003**

Bill Hathaway used a typewriter, bless him, and organized his weekly reports to Pastor Samuels under familiar headings: Store, Medical, General, Mine, School, Church Building, Personal. Little is said of Mrs Forbes. It was slow going as I skimmed the typeface, until 'Forbes' leapt off the page. There it was. One Friday, early in November 1955, Mrs. Forbes didn't come to the store at all. Brother Hathaway wrote to Pastor Samuels:

The only serious case this week is old Mrs. Forbes. She has been ill for some time on and off with dysentery and under the Flying Doctor has made good progress. When she did not come to the store as usual on Friday my wife went over to see if she was all right and found her in a state of semi-collapse on her bed. She was unable to walk and in a very weak condition indeed. Florence hurried back to me and I took the truck over and brought her here to our home where we will keep her till she is well enough to be moved. The Flying Doctor said her condition has been brought on by insufficient food. She was

starving as being too sick to eat at first, she later became too weak to get food for herself. She is a good deal stronger and we feel it will not be long before she is her old bright self again. She is no trouble at all and we think the very fact that she is being cared for and has not to worry about being alone over the hill, is helping as much as anything.<sup>103</sup>

The Hathaways opened their home to Mrs Forbes, giving their bedding and care until she recovered. Each week, they wrote an update to Pastor Samuels:

Mrs. Forbes continues to [be] on the mend and today she was persuaded to sit up on a chair for awhile...Mrs Forbes is doing well and was up and out in the sun again today. Last night at her request, we had a prayer of thanksgiving for her recovery.<sup>104</sup>

### **Nepabunna, November 1955**

Mrs Forbes is grateful for Sister Hathaway's care. But she prefers to sit on her own, on the verandah, feeling her strength return day by day, and watching. The workers installing the Hathaways new sink tip their hats to her, which was more than she got from that Mr Cron, the mission teacher with whom Florence was waging a frigid war. Little Teddy comes to sit by her for a few days, convalescing from the kerosene he swallowed, and she smiles at his questions until his mother shushes him and moves him away.<sup>105</sup> Mostly Rebecca looks north, where the bright green of growing tree tops feathers the skyline of tawny folds in the hills. She imagines the creek, and the path she used to take to the waterhole, before returning to her little hut of a home that is now hidden from her view, and beyond her reach.

Mrs Forbes's progress is slow. John and Raymond are called to the mission, to pour concrete and pin together forty sheets of iron for a shed for their mother to live in, just east of the church, 'Where I can keep an eye on you,' Florence says, as Mrs Forbes watches her boys sweat in the midday heat.<sup>106</sup> Sister Hathaway has found her a good bed from the mission stores, and put all the costs— seventeen pounds, five shillings —to the Aborigines Protection Board, who still list Mrs Forbes as a dependent of the Mission, 'A white woman, aged 76,



widow of a full-blood Aborigine.’<sup>107</sup> Mrs Forbes says little, only smiles politely, and patiently. They will put her where they want her, now.

### **Druid Vale, December, 2003**

The enormous removalist truck has been parked beside the house all day, and it is full. I am expecting to spend all night cleaning the house for the family to whom we have sold it, once I have attended the Hawker Kindy breakup. After a year convincing the Education Department to keep the kindy open, despite diminishing numbers, I cannot miss this celebration, although I am about to join the exodus myself. Besides my four-year-old is in the Christmas play, and cleaning must wait. Then my eight-year-old daughter drops my baby on the concrete, and we have to factor in a rushed trip to the Hawker hospital where they can use their new X-ray machine to confirm that his swollen arm is not broken. Still, it seems a better idea for me to drive to our new home at Monarto with the sobbing baby, than send Murray and stay behind cleaning. Secretly I think he got the short straw.

I load up the trailer with all the animals that are making the move with us: meat rabbits, ducks, geese, goats, dogs and the cat. Murray will bring the horse. The fowls swelter in the late afternoon sun during the kindy breakup, but soon night is falling and I am driving south down the bitumen road to Monarto in the Adelaide Hills. The children fall asleep in the car, and I am left with the radio and the dark. I cry most of the way. I am leaving a life, a community, a country, for the sake of my husband’s career. ‘I can write my book anywhere,’ I had said, seeing the urgency on his face as he considered the job offer in Adelaide. ‘I just don’t want to live in a city again,’ I added.

I arrive in the middle of the night, and first unload my sleeping children onto the mattresses on the floor in one room. Then I start on the animals. The dark calms them, and even the geese are quiet as I nervously take them by the neck one by one from their cage and put them into the new yards. I set water and feed in place by torch light, and return to the house to lie beside my children. Even their night breathing echoes in the empty house. One of them wakes and cries and I settle them again with soothing sounds. I take a long time to get to sleep.

### **Nepabunna, 1956**

It is the first Monday of the New Year, and Bill and Florence have helped Mrs Forbes over to her new home. Mrs Forbes sits in the grey light of the corrugated iron in her rocking chair and by her old table that have been brought up from over the hill. The Hathways smile benignly at her as they close the door. '[She] has settled down very well: the fresh interest has done her a lot of good', wrote Brother Hathaway to Pastor Samuels.<sup>108</sup>

By mid-April, Pastor Samuels has agreed to order a small wood stove 'for Mrs. Forbes' mansion.', as he calls the 'one bedroom and a kitchen – [a] corrugated iron shack with a flat roof.'<sup>109</sup> It has become too difficult for Mrs Forbes to cook on the open fire that smokes her tiny space, and there are many days when she does not cook at all. Besides, the children who come so readily for a bullseye lolly or a sip of her Bonox – or Bovril when Pastor Samuels was good enough to send up the more expensive version<sup>110</sup> – are not always good for their promise to fetch her firewood from the creek, and fewer still take the trouble to chip it for this newfangled stove. Oh they have time – Mrs Forbes can hear them chiacking on the flat and kicking up the dust that makes its way under her rough eaves and settles on her table. In fact she can hear most things through her thin walls, and visitors no longer need to come to tell

her the news of the camp. Besides, she has fewer visitors now. When Brother Hathaway comes with his list and his questions, she can read from his 'List of Aged People on Mission' the names of only seven of her old friends.

Fred Johnson approx 80  
Mrs Fred Johnson approx 65  
Ted Coulthard approx 77  
Alice Coulthard approx 77  
Tim Wilton approx 67  
Aggie Ryan approx 60  
Rebecca Forbes – 77<sup>111</sup>

Few of the younger ones even remember why the old *udnyu artu* lives among them; they know it has always been like that, and from time to time they must check on her and tell their aunties she is OK.

Mrs Forbes hears the church bells of the new church – loud enough to wake the dead, she is so close - and attends to see her old friends, at their insistence, and to sing the songs Mr Page had taught them all, in the church that Mr Eaton tried to build for them, and which has at last been completed in his name.<sup>112</sup>

### **Port Augusta, 2002**

Pauline McKenzie and I went to visit Auntie Norah Wilton. She was a faithful Christian, and I wondered if she might remember the hymns that Mrs Forbes used to sing at Nepbunna. As Auntie Norah moved about her kitchen, fixing us a cup of tea and tutting as her nephew helped himself to her cupboards, she told us how Mrs Forbes and another lady would sing up the front of the church, 'Calvary's stream is flowing so free'.<sup>113</sup>

Calv'ry's stream is flowing,  
Calv'ry's stream is flowing;  
Flowing so free for you and for me.<sup>114</sup>

'Calvary's stream' is the gush of blood and water from Jesus' pierced side, as he hung crucified. I tried to imagine what that ever decreasing congregation of *yuras* made of the song, as they sang in that dusty church. The gush of blood when boys became men; the steady trickle of water they prayed for in well shaft after well shaft? The blood of their missionary staining the floor of the spare white hut; the cleansing flood of water carrying debris from the hills along the creeks after rains until the waterholes were clear and fresh again and the banks blushed green with the new shoots that would bloom and wither and be gone again in a week. Calvary's stream of sacrifice and redemption had flowed so freely for these faithful bands.

### **Nepabunna, June 1957**

Mrs Forbes attends perhaps her first ever 'white wedding' in the Fred Eaton Memorial Church.

The wedding between Bessie and Fred was a milestone in the United Aborigines Mission at Nepabunna., in the heart of the Flinders Ranges. It was the first Christian wedding between people of the mission, and the first ever held at the Eaton Memorial Church. The pretty bride was Miss Bessie Wilton and the proud groom was Mr Fred McKenzie, the son of the late Mr F. McKenzie and Mrs McKenzie. Fred's father was the last king at Nepabunna.

The wedding was conducted on Saturday, June 29th by the missionary, Mr W. Hathaway, whose fair haired daughter Eileen was trainbearer.

The bride wore a gown of figured ivory and a two-tiered white veil, held in place by a coronet of orange blossom. She carried a bouquet of white artificial roses. Her cousin, Miss Elva Wilton, who was bridesmaid, wore a lavender net over satin and three roses in her hair. She carried a bouquet of Talisman roses.

The groom was attended by Mr Bob Coulthard.

Mr Dan Coulthard sang 'Take my life' while the register was being signed...

...The people at Nepabunna all seemed very impressed by the solemn sacraments of Christian marriage.<sup>115</sup>

Mrs Forbes watches young Fred beside his bride, holding himself like his father, but she knows, and so do all the rest, that he is *vadnapa*. Her own Ray is still unmarried, and the other *vadnapas* had gone away from the mission to be married. But not this time. She searches for the faces of Ted Coulthard and Fred Johnson in the crowd. Fred's jaw is working at his new dentures, and Ted Coulthard catches her eye, but shows her nothing.

### **Nepabunna, February 1959**

Dear Mr Samuels,

Greetings in the Name of the Lord...

...GENERAL

Home again! Don't really feel we have been away. It is really too far to go for such a short time, as one week of the four was entirely taken up with travelling. We hope that by the end of this year we will be able to have the two months break, the one we had to miss and the one which will be then due.

At Yongala we learned that Ted. Coulthard had passed away that morning. We called at Hawker and after a couple of visits to the hospital and one to the Police we finally got away and reached home at 3.10AM on Wed. Bed at 4.30 and anything but fit for the big day of store and funeral which followed. However we did get through, praise the Lord, and everything has again settled down. I am enclosing the Certificate of cause of death, and also an a/c from the Leigh Creek Hospital...

God bless you, Yours,  
W Hathaway.<sup>116</sup>

### **Nepabunna, March 1959**

Dear Mr Samuels

Greetings in the Name of the Lord...

GENERAL

...Re the funeral. As you know there are two burying places here one for each 'spirit.' Husbands are never buried in the same place as their wives. On the afternoon of the funeral two of the daughters put on quite a turn because their father was not being buried

beside their mother, this although it had never, as far as we know, been done for centuries! One said, 'If this is blackfellows way, I'm finished with it.' Members of the family who are 'tribally' forbidden to attend the graveside did so, and there was no native ceremony preceding the service which I performed there. Usually about four members of the opposite 'spirit' as they help to lay the body on its bed of leaves, each say things in the native tongue. On some occasions water is poured on the head of the deceased and fires were lit outside the camps to keep the 'spirit' away and there was not nearly so much wailing as usually occurs. As you know, it is the custom to burn or demolish the dwelling of the deceased, but the very day of the funeral one of the old women approached my wife and told her she intended to live in his little one roomed house. So far she has not slept in it but she lives there in the daytime and has the place quite nice and comfortable.

Furthermore it was agreed by most, if not all, that we should have a general cemetery. We feel that at last the fear that has so long held these people in bondage is being broken down and we praise the Lord...

WH<sup>117</sup>



*Nepabunna General cemetery, with community and Wayanha in the background.*

*Photograph courtesy of Tracy Spencer*

### **Nepabunna, April 1959**

Mrs Forbes fusses at her wood stove. She cannot keep it alight and the firewood the children bought last week has dwindled to the pieces she knew would be no good – too awkwardly shaped, too green, or powdered into dust by the termites. And she cannot collect it herself, being so far from the creek. She pours herself a small drink of cool water from the billy she

keeps full beside her stove, and sits down in her rocking chair and waits in the gray light of her tin shed. Dust whirls on the sunbeams that fill the space with muggy warmth. Sometimes she reads. Sometimes she writes letters to Joyce. But mostly she waits. Time is only the movement of the shadow her new home casts on the bare earth that surrounds it.

### **Quorn, 2001**

My questions bemuse Daisy at times, I am sure, but she is always thoughtful in her replies.

‘So she fitted into the community life?’ I ask, across the brim of my tea cup.

‘Oh yes, she fitted in real well, yes.’ Daisy smiles at me.

‘And were there any differences in the ways she was living, like did she bring any of her English ways of living?’ I am fishing for the exotic, that point of interest that will make a good story.

‘No, I just think she lived like a normal life. You know, she used to eat what Aboriginal people give her, and lived on the government rations. She didn’t want to get the white rations [or] get on a pension or anything. She refused or something: they wanted to shift her to Beltana but she didn’t want to, she wanted to stay there...she didn’t want to go, she stayed there and that’s why she picked her place to be buried where Jim Page is.’

‘So she chose..?’ I have a habit, I discover, of not finishing my sentences. There was no need.

‘Yes she chose that.’<sup>118</sup> And there is my answer.

### **Nepabunna, August, 1959**

The sturdy corrugated iron shed to the east of the Church is as empty now as the dark brown hut over the hill, near the creek. Its flattened tins have already lifted off the walls here and there, but the cast iron camp oven is still stubbornly sitting in the fireplace where John and Raymond left it. They had thought their mother would not need that, anticipating the new wood stove the mission promised for her new home.

But now the wood stove is as cold as the chill iron walls, carrying the touch of winter nights far into the day. Its fire grill is dark and dead, with blackened embers that have not been scraped out. Mrs Forbes has not been there for two days, and for more than a week before that could not tend to it herself after a heavy cold took hold of her.

Mrs Forbes lies on the mended white sheets Florence Hathaway has used to make up the spare bed in the missionaries' house. Several gray government blankets are pulled up to her chin, but she still shivers. There is nothing of her, just a vague mound beneath the bed clothes. She is quiet.

Jack and Joyce and the grandchildren have been to see her, but could not stay for long. Raymond has had to return to work as well, after trying to tend her in her cottage. Florence took up her care, visiting five times a day, until with the Flying Doctor's permission, the Hathaways moved her into the mission house.<sup>119</sup> Now Mrs Forbes lies still, taking small breaths, with her eyes shut so she can see the places her memories take her. As Florence turns her, and inserts a thermometer between her lips, Becky is feeling warm brown hands on her body in the sandy creeks of the Corner Country, where borders meet, and are crossed, where her two pink sons were delivered from her pale body into the rich brown hands of the midwives, who taught her how to bring forth life. As Florence tucks the blankets in around



her, Rebecca feels the warmth of the earth where Jack has made a bed for his family, amongst the sea of sandhills flickering orange and black in the campfire light.

The thermometer is withdrawn, and there is silence. Then:

‘A little cold water, perhaps, Mrs Forbes?’

‘Thank you.’ Rebecca’s eyes are still closed, anticipating the cool thrill of cupping water to her lips from the Nepabunna waterhole.

When Florence returns with the water, she sits Mrs Forbes up to drink. It is like moving a doll. Mrs Forbes opens her eyes.

‘This is my last day, Mrs Hathaway,’ she says.<sup>120</sup>

‘Trust in the Lord, Mrs Forbes. He is your Salvation.’ Florence tries to speak gently, but she is tired from being up all night tending the frail old lady, and Bill was waiting for his breakfast.

‘I do trust, Mrs Hathaway. Life’s a lottery. You have to have trust.’ Mrs Forbes is looking straight at Mrs Hathaway, holding the cup of water out towards her. Mrs Hathaway looks away.

‘Fred Johnson is outside inquiring after you. He says he would like to see you. I told him that would not be possible, of course, but that you are as well as can be expected.’

Rebecca closes her eyes again, and begins to shuffle down into the bed. Mrs Hathaway removes the extra pillow, and leaves the cup of water beside her.

‘I’ll be back later,’ she says and leaves the room. Rebecca opens her eyes, and two tears slide out of their corners, and across her strong cheekbones. Becky imagines she can hear the old man singing for her, even now.

When Florence returns, Mrs Forbes has still not touched her water. Her forehead is hot, and her breathing laboured. Florence administers another dose of the antibiotics the Flying Doctor left, but does not expect them to make much difference. She has seen death before. Then Mrs Forbes's lips are moving, and she struggles to lift herself on her thin elbows. Florence moves to soothe the labouring woman.

'Mrs Hathaway, I want to be buried next to Mr Page.'<sup>121</sup> The effort exhausts her, and she lies back on the pillow. Florence pats her thin hair.

'Mrs Forbes, we can arrange a lovely plot for you in the new cemetery.'

'No, I told my sons, I want to be buried next to Mr Page. *Udnyu, see.*' Florence frowns. There has not been a word of that language spoken in her house, and she does not follow.

'*Nyanga*, Mr Page. He was a good man.' Rebecca's eyes are closed again.

'I'll see what we can do, Mrs Forbes. Of course. I'll talk to Bill.' Florence leaves the room, and closes the door behind her.

### **Copley, 2001**

Granny Dolly has thick round glasses through which she looks at me carefully. She holds her two hands out in front of her, emphatically laying a direction for me.

Mrs. Forbes should have been buried this way, not...' and she twists her hands ninety degrees. 'Not at the feet. I told her son that. And she should have been buried with our people because she grown up with us, was one of us.'<sup>122</sup>

Earlier that day, on the other side of the railway tracks, I had been told by one of the older white residents:

She should be buried here [at Copley cemetery], not under a bush out there. But she was a white so couldn't be buried with Aborigines so the grave's on its own. They should move it. There's just her and that missionary who slit his throat. If you kill yourself they can't

give you a Christian burial so he was buried up on the hill. They shouldn't have buried her there.<sup>123</sup>

I visited the graves each time I went to Nepabunna, with sadness and a frown. A falling chicken wire and mulga fence surrounded them. One, a neat rectangle of white gravel with a sturdy mulga Cross bearing his name, and date, and 'Jesus Saves'. The other an unmarked mound, lying across his feet. I had so many questions of those graves. And they asked such hard questions of me. Where would I be buried, and why?



**Hawker, 2003**

Sylvia Brady told me about Mrs Forbes's funeral. None of her immediate family could be there, and Bill Hathaway led a small graveside service where she was buried, up the hill and beside Jim Page's grave. Afterwards, his car wouldn't start, and Sylvia and the other young women thought 'Oh, she won't let us go.'<sup>124</sup> They walked back to camp instead, with the words from the hymn they had sung still repeating in their minds:

There's a land that is fairer than day  
And by faith we can see it afar  
For the Father waits over the way  
To prepare us a dwelling place there.

Chorus:

In the sweet by and by  
We shall meet on that beautiful shore  
In the sweet by and by  
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.

We shall sing on that beautiful shore  
The melodious songs of the blest;  
And our spirits shall sorrow no more-  
Not a sigh for the blessing of rest.

Chorus

To our bountiful Father above  
We will offer the tribute of praise  
For the glorious gift of His love,  
And the blessings that hallow our days.

Chorus:

In the sweet by and by  
We shall meet on that beautiful shore  
In the sweet by and by  
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.<sup>125</sup>

## **Alice Springs, 2008**

All our roads lead back to Adnyamathanha *yarta*. This year, I will make my final visit to the Flinders Ranges for this project. I'll drive the long road south in my old short wheel base Toyota, and I'll come down the Oodnadatta Track, so that the first sign I have of the ranges is Termination Hill, and I'll remember the story Terry Coulthard told me and a group of tourists around a campfire at Iga Warta one night, many years back.

Terry told the story of *Papardityirdityi*, who lived at *Kakarlpunha*, Termination Hill, west of Lyndhurst. The hill rises on its own out of the flat plain, perhaps a reminder of *Papardityirdityi's* childhood where one by one his family members spurn him, and leave him all alone. He nurtured himself, and became a giant of a fellow, eating *yuras* until an avenging party took him to task and he was killed by a younger brother. His fallen body is the hill, *Kakarlpunha*.<sup>126</sup> So far, it is a story of exile, murder and revenge. But Terry took up the story at that point, and said that when *Papardityirdityi* died, all the people came and cut out a piece of his tongue, and when they ate it, they all had different languages, and so they all spread out to different areas then, some even as far away as England. Terry looked around the group. His gaze rested on me a moment. 'So,' he said, 'you being here, it's like you're just coming back home.' And I felt so grateful that he had woven a net of belonging around me that night, and the feeling never left me.

South of Lyndhurst I will pass miles of grey mullock heaps dug out of the ground that was *Yurlu's* campfire before the Leigh Creek coal mine dug it up to power our houses. I'll pull in at Copley for a quandong pie from the bakery, before I cross the railway tracks and drive slowly around the Housing Trust houses, looking for signs of the people I once knew there.

Granny Dolly now lives with her daughter in Port Augusta: Rosie and Harry Brady moved into the old folks home in Port Augusta just last year. Rita and Lorna might still be at home, and I'll tap on their doors to find out.

From Copley, under the watchful eyes of the two *Akurras* in the nearby jump ups, I'll head east 5km to Leigh Creek station to see Shirley Coulthard. I miss the gravelly warmth of Leo's welcome every time, and can't imagine how his family press on without him. But they manage. They have his spirit.

Further east I'll wave at the stump of a tree on the banks of the Finke Creek, preserved in a wire box by the side of the road, marking where Granny Gertie Johnson was born. I'll stop in the wide layby at *Minerawuta*, and depending on the time of day, visit Jim Page's campsite, and the ruins of the settlement, and the rectangular fenced area where the children were buried. But not if the sun is beginning to sink towards the hills. I'll watch for *Artawararlpanha*, Mt Serle, and the eagle shape on the top of the hill, and the black cave mouth where old *Wildu* got his revenge on his cheeky nephews. Then the sign will come up, '*Inanga Adnyamathanha yarta*' and I'll rattle across the grid and I'll be within the bounds of that twenty-five odd square miles of country given to the UAM for Nepabunna, and finally given to the Adnyamathanha through the Aboriginal Lands Trust in the 1970s.

I'll probably camp at Iga Warta that night, and in the morning will jog to *Nguthunanga Mai Ambatanha*, Damper Hill, and look down the failed well shafts of Boundary Gate. Then I'll load up for Nepabunna.

I'm not sure which order I will do things in next. I will probably drive over the small hill and park next to the ruins of Mrs Forbes's old hut, and go for a walk down the creek to see if there's water in the waterhole. I like to sit down there.

I will see a few people in town: Gladys and Mick Wilton, Ian and Judy Johnson, Auntie Mona Jackson. I'm not sure who will be living in Granny Gertie's flash new home.

I will also go to visit those I knew in the cemetery, lying beside their husband or wife or in a plot still big enough for those yet to come. 'Hello Granny Gertie, its me, Tracy, visiting you. Murray Muirhead's wife. Well, I used to be. And hello, Leo, and Artie. I've been writing about you. *Wonga wonga*, you stay there now.'

On my way back out of town that I will take the track up the hill south of the community, and pull up, right there on the track, because no one much will come by. I'll walk over the uneven ground with my camera, ready to take yet more photographs of the two graves I have already tried to capture from so many angles. The safety fence is still in place, and the artificial flowers under the glass jar on Mrs Forbes's grave still have some colour. I'll wish I'd picked some wild flowers to place on Jim's neat white gravel, and in front of Rebecca's dignified headstone. She smiles up at me from the cameo portrait embedded into the dark stone.

'It's me, Becky. It's me, Jim. Just coming by to say hello again. I've finished writing about you, you know. But I'll still come. I'll still be coming back.' I'll stand and watch for a while: I might see the same three donkeys watching me from behind the scrub, or the white swell of hundreds of corellas wheeling through the air above me. East, the ever-blue of *Wayanha*, Mt McKinlay, will watch me back. That's the way that Becky is facing, I will realise, and imagine for a moment all the way over the horizon to Yandama, and Winbar on the Darling river, and Sydney. And then I'll move around the fence until I stand at the head of Jim's grave, facing north. Back the way I have come. And I'll wonder where I might be buried, one day.

‘*Wonga wonga*, you stay here now, OK?’ I’ll murmur as I hold on to the wire fence, and then I’ll return to my car. I’ll have just a few more visits to make.

I’ll have a cup of tea with Keith Nichols at Beltana, although it’s out of my way, before heading to Hawker where I will visit the few friends I have still living there, and drive out to look at Druid Vale one more time. But I want to reach Quorn. That’s where I’ll stay a few days with my good friend, Shirley, and look forward to one of Margaret Brown’s warm hugs, and hope to see Aunty Clara at Colebrook Community. But there will be something else I will do there this time, that I haven’t done before. It seemed too sad.

A little way out of town, past the golf course, on the Wilmington Road towards Bruce, is the Quorn cemetery. I was only there the once, and I’ll have to walk up and down the rows to find the fresh headstone I am expecting. I will be looking for Daisy Shannon, Rebecca and Jack’s oldest grandchild, and my friend. I got to know her when I first moved to the Flinders Ranges, when her’s was the only brown face in the Quorn Uniting Church congregation. She attended faithfully, every single Sunday. It was she who framed the words on her grandmother’s headstone that so fully sum up a life of ‘a real white Australian’:

In loving memory of Rebecca Forbes nee Rebecca Castledine.  
Born London England 1878 Died Nepabunna 1959.  
From the land where time begins to the timeless land.  
Loving Wife of Jack ‘Witchetty’ Forbes.  
Fond mother of John and Raymond, mother in law of Joyce.  
Dearest Grandmother of Daisy, Daniel and Darrell.  
Our loving great and great great grandmother.  
Peacefully Sleeping.  
‘A true friend and companion of the Adnyamathanha people.’<sup>127</sup>

#### **Quorn, November 2004**

Dear Tracy  
Hi hoping this will find you all well as parting of this leaves me the same...



I am pleased that you could find out more about my grandfather. Yes Wanaaring and Bourke are not a bad place, but I couldn't live there unless you were born there. Yes it is nearly time for Christmas and it only 12 month that you and Murray and children moved away from the Flinders. I have been back to Nepabunna and Iga Warta couple of times this year and visit everybody. My son Philip is still working at Iga Warta and I am still writing to Grace and we are good friends now for I found my last Auntie because she will be my father's cousin.

Well Tracy I will come to a close.

Now take care

Regards, from Daisy.

### **Another Ending**

This is not an ending for me, not really. Nor for you. Lives don't end, no matter where the bodies are buried or ashes scattered. Bye and bye, we all meet, in some way, weaving ourselves into each other until we are all bound together in one hybrid tapestry of stories. I will never finish learning about new stories about Rebecca and Jim, and who could ever tell stories of me without including the ten years of my life when they were my constant companions and quest? And you will never finish with their stories, either; nor with mine. You'll want to know what happened next. You'll want to know what the moral of it all is. Every parable was like that, originally, until some editor couldn't help themselves but try and explain it all, as if there's a rule for living in there somewhere. It's not like that: this parable of the lives of Jim and Rebecca and the Adnyamathanha community cracks open what we thought was colonial history, to let us see something new about the ways people live and die together in Australia. You can't be told how to do something new. You just have to live it. Like they did. So good luck on your journey... after all, 'Life's a lottery!'

### **Dedications**

*Dedicated to all those who have passed on before the conclusion of this project, including*

Daisy Shannon, buried in Quorn

Granny Gertie Johnson, buried at Nepabunna

Leo and Shirley Coulthard, buried beside one another in Nepabunna general cemetery

Rosie Brady, buried at Copley

Keith Nicholls, buried at Beltana

Reg Williams, buried in Toowoomba, Queensland

Granny Dolly Coulthard, buried at Nepabunna

Evelyn Coulthard, buried at Port Augusta

Darryl Forbes, buried at Stirling North

Hector Harrison, buried in Broken Hill

Frank Warwick, buried at Holowilena Station

and Reverend Derek Evans, my minister in my late teens, who first supported me to meet and understand Indigenous people, and who died by suicide at Monash University where he had ministered as chaplain.

*May they live on in the people we have become by knowing them.*

Also dedicated to all those who gave their time and stories, including:

Margaret Brown

Aunty Clara Brady

Cliff Coulthard

Elsie Jackson

Eileen Lewis

Enis Marsh

Ken McKenzie

Philip Shannon

Rodger Shannon

Bill Snell

Frank and Mus Warwick

John Wiley

Mary Woods

Lena Coulthard

Pauline McKenzie

Sylvia Brady

Terry Coulthard

Josie Coulthard

Grace Denison

Aunty Lorna DeMell

Aunty Rita Coulthard

Sharon Cruse

Jillian Marsh

Luise Hercus

Charlie Jackson

Mona Jackson

Roger Johnson

Buck McKenzie

Irene Mohammed

Gina Richardson

Aunty Gladys Wilton

Aunty Norah Wilton

...and the many, many others who gave their time and stories to me, to weave around you,  
and bind us all together in this time and place in Australia.

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- <sup>108</sup> Ibid. , 7/1/56
- <sup>109</sup>; Charlie Jackson, pers comm 17/10/01
- <sup>110</sup> UAM archives, Nepabunna correspondence, 25/2/56
- <sup>111</sup> UAM archives, Nepabunna correspondence, August 1956
- <sup>112</sup> correspondents, V. (1930-). Correspondence file relating to Nepabunna Mission. UAM Archives. Melbourne. 10/3/56
- <sup>113</sup> Wilton, N. (2002). **CONVERSATION with Nora Wilton at Port Augusta 3/8/02**. T. Spencer. Port Augusta.
- <sup>114</sup> <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/c/a/s/castream.htm>. Words: Eliza E Hewitt (1851-1920).
- <sup>115</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>116</sup> Ibid. 14/2/59
- <sup>117</sup> Ibid. 6/3/59
- <sup>118</sup> Shannon, D. (2001). Transcript of Interview 1. T. Spencer. Quorn SA: Oral history recorded interview.
- <sup>119</sup> UAM archives, Nepabunna correspondence, 8/8/59
- <sup>120</sup> UAM archives, Nepabunna correspondence, 14/8/59
- <sup>121</sup> UAM archives, Nepabunna correspondence, 14/8/59
- <sup>122</sup> Coulthard, D. (2001). *Conversation with Dolly Coulthard 16701*. T. Spencer. Copley.
- <sup>123</sup> *Conversation with Tommy Agnew 16/7/01*
- <sup>124</sup> Brady, S. (2003). **CONVERSATION with Sylvia Brady**. T. Spencer. Hawker SA.

<sup>125</sup> Sankey, I. D. Sacred Songs and Solos and New Hymns and Solos. London, Morgan and Scott Ltd.

<sup>126</sup> Dorothy Tunbridge in association with the Nepabunna Aboriginal School and the Adnyamathanha people of the Flinders Ranges, S. A. (1988). Flinders Ranges Dreaming. Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press. p52-53

<sup>127</sup> Shannon, D. (2001). Transcript of Interview 1. T. Spencer. Quorn SA: Oral history recorded interview.