

## *Yijarni: True Stories from Gurindji Country*

edited by Erika Charola and Felicity Meakins

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The Gurindji people of the Northern Territory's southern Victoria River District are well known because of their 1966 walk-off from Wave Hill Station that led to equal wages in the pastoral industry and federal land rights legislation. Their history before the walk-off, however, has received less attention and is the subject of this impressive book. *Yijarni*, the Gurindji word for true stories from the period following the Dreamtime, brings together a wide variety of accounts dealing with that history. As the first chapter explains, *Yijarni* aims to reveal the Gurindji people's past from their own perspective. Transcribed oral accounts are presented in both the English and Gurindji languages. They give details of events that Gurindji elders experienced first-hand or learned about from their parents and grandparents. Evidence from other sources, such as police records and photographs are also included, as are Gurindji artworks. The editors, Erika Charola and Felicity Meakins, provide introductory sections and some discussions of particular events based on European sources.

Most of the book is concerned with the period since European occupation. Chapter 2, however, looks at what happened before then. This was a time when different Gurindji groups were sometimes in conflict over women and resources. Human beings and supernatural creatures were often in contact. Such was the case, as Ronnie Wavehill explains, when a man took a mermaid from a river. Chapter 3 moves into the beginnings of European occupation that occurred from the mid-nineteenth century until the early twentieth century. It was an era of considerable violence. There were brutal massacres of Gurindji people, like that at Limbunya Station harrowingly described by Jimmy Manngayarri. The original Wave Hill Station, founded in 1882, is the focus for Chapter 4, explaining how the Gurindji began to work and settle at the station. Of particular interest are stories of the huge 1924 flood, such as that of Blanche Bulngari: 'We came back to the station

[following the flood] and saw that nothing was left. Everything was gone!’ (p. 112). Chapter 5 tells how the station, under the control of Lord Vestey’s cattle business, was moved further away from the Victoria River. For a long period, as Maurie Ryan and others recount, welfare officials removed ‘half-caste’ Gurindji children from their families. In 1929, the first aeroplane appeared at Wave Hill. Also in this chapter is Vincent Lingiari’s description of events leading to the 1966 walk-off. The short Chapter 6 examines the site of what is now Kalkaringi. Ronnie Wavehill and Violet Wadrill show how Afghans ran stores there and at Inverway Station. Early policemen and trackers are considered in Chapter 7. There are several accounts of the notorious Constable Gordon Stott, including Banjo Ryan’s description of him forcing Gurindji workers at Waterloo Station to beat each other. ‘They really bashed each other ... They were all battered from the beating’ (p. 219).

Great care was taken in compiling *Yijarni*. While each of its stories has a named author, during the recording process another elder was present as a ‘witness’ (p. 1). He or she confirmed details before a recording commenced and monitored the telling to ensure there were no errors or omissions. The book, Meakins and Charola comment, ‘is the result of an extensive collaboration between Gurindji knowledge holders, artists of Kurungkarni Arts at Kalkaringi, the Murnkurrumurnkurru rangers from the Central Land Council, photographers and linguists’ (p. 2). Non-Gurindji primary source materials were researched at the National Archives of Australia, the Northern Territory Archives Service, Charles Darwin University Library, the National Library of Australia and the South Australian Museum. Many secondary sources were also used, scholars with relevant knowledge were consulted and visits were made to, and photographs taken of, historical sites. The highly regarded cartographer Brenda Thornley created maps, while an artists’ retreat was responsible for the paintings that respond to *Yijarni*’s stories. There is also a detailed index.

The result of all this is a significant addition to scholarship. At one level, *Yijarni* is a comprehensive regional study that does much to complement other recent work on the Victoria River District and the Gurindji from scholars such as Minoru Hokari, Darrell Lewis and Charlie Ward. It includes fascinating details not found elsewhere. At another level, it contributes to a better informed and more nuanced national understanding of Australia’s Indigenous history. There is an unvarnished recognition in the book that life for the Gurindji during the precontact period was at times difficult and inter-tribal warfare occurred. Although it carefully documents the European invaders’ all too frequent, appalling brutality, some Gurindji storytellers discuss frontier violence more dispassionately than might be expected. Ronnie Wavehill, for instance, while concluding a massacre description says, ‘I hadn’t recorded this story yet, and now I’ve told this story too. I showed people that place and talked about how they shot people’ (p. 53). There are also stories of ways in which Aboriginal people adapted to new situations and the extent to which they retained traditional beliefs and knowledge.

*Yijarni* is well written, logically organised and attractively presented. I cannot vouch for the quality of its translations, but they read convincingly. The chapter structure is sensible, with the material in each chapter being easy to follow. The excellent layout is a tribute to the graphic designers involved. Images and maps are very clearly reproduced and properly located. When combined with the stories, many of the images convey a powerful sense of place. They demonstrate, as I discovered during my own travels in the southern Victoria River District, that Gurindji country is often astonishingly beautiful and its historic sites have special qualities.

*Yijarni's* creators deserve praise for an outstanding achievement.

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