Introduction

From the time Western colonisers forced their way on to Aboriginal lands, they had deemed the humans already here a nuisance. The colonisers had become fixated on wiping my ancestors out. They were hell-bent on destroying Australia's Indigenous cultures and erasing black peoples from the nation's psyche. But it is through their official files, documents and journals that our post-contact histories survive. The colonisers left the perfect paper trail.

They were ignorant of the fact that people had lived here for thousands of years. Ignorant of sophisticated Indigenous ways of living that were complete with customs, belief systems, kinship patterns, cultural interactions and trading routes. But not ignorant of a pre-colonial economy, it seems. Our Aboriginal ancestors had worked the Australian landscape in various ways. Their resourcefulness is extolled in those paper trails – the journals of early explorers. Seeds were harvested and stored,

fish traps and river dams built and permanent shelters erected that the early colonists noticed, but dismissed, preferring instead to promote Australia's Indigenous peoples as 'hunter-gatherers' roaming the landscape in search of food. A convenient untruth.

To westerners the Kimberley was rugged and inhospitable in climate and terrain. This perspective was, for a brief moment, overturned by the explorer Alexander Forrest in the late 1870s. The younger brother of Western Australia's first premier, John Forrest, he enthusiastically gave a robust assessment of the region as being ideal for pastoralism. A land grab followed. Without any consultation with the Aboriginal owners, gudia pastoralists were offered leases, some as large as one million acres. Alexander Forrest likened the region to the gold-bearing country around Pine Creek in the Northern Territory, leading to the first, and only, short-lived gold rush in the Kimberley from 1886 to 1889.

By the late 1890s the pastoral industry had expanded. In the northeast Kimberley, colonialists from the eastern colonies, Francis Connor, Denis Doherty and Michael and Patrick Durack, joined together to form a pastoral company. In the west Kimberley, influential Perth-based men like Alexander Forrest and Isadore Emanuel snapped up leases. Together these interlopers' properties eventually morphed into the beef-producing empires of Western Australia.

In the early years of the pastoral industry, sheep stations emerged along the lower Mardoowarra valley on the homelands of Nigena people. This country was among the last Indigenous homelands in Western Australia to be appropriated for pastoralism. The land grabbers included the Cornish brothers Hamlet and Anthony, who took up a run between Beagle Bay and the

Mardoowarra and called it Yeeda Station, 25 kilometres from Derby. Their initial descriptions of the people living there were flattering: 'We noticed they were a fine race of men, athletic, tall and muscular, no covering whatever, with the exception of a woven band, about an inch wide, round their waists. A few emu feathers, and a small bone through their nose, which indicated full dress.'

It didn't take long before the intruders turned on the locals. The pastoralists claimed that our people were a 'problem'. Their presence, they protested, hindered their pastoral efforts. Not only did their stock have to compete with Aboriginal people for pasture, Aboriginals found the sheep a tasty and easy to capture meat source. It was stealing, the pastoralists lamented, and took the law into their own hands. Distant from authorities in faraway Perth and often fearing for their lives, they took to killing Aboriginal people across the Kimberley as a method of control. 'Bush justice', they called it.

Some of the station owners moved into colonial politics, as did Connor and Forrest, who became powerful figures. Entrenched in the Western Australian Legislative Council, they ruthlessly pursued their pastoral interests, passing legislation to regulate Aboriginal employment in their favour. Moreover, with ever-increasing severity, they used the offence of 'sheep stealing' as a cover to imprison Aboriginal people on whose country their stations had been marked out.

Police were initially introduced to the Kimberley in the 1880s and those who tried to protect the Aboriginals were removed and replaced with police who sided with the pastoralists. They dealt with 'offenders' in cruel and harsh ways. Slaughtering them or shackling people together with neck chains and forcing them

to walk hundreds of miles to jails, to be put on ships that took them to far-off places, never to return. Most were men, though women and teenagers were also known to have been captured. Still, our people fought back. The central Kimberley resistance fighter Jandamarra defied the newcomers' demands that he be implicated in massacres of his own Bunuba people, and he was one of many who made life difficult for the invaders.

In Nigena country, from the time the Cornish brothers arrived, our people resisted them. They fought back. A war between the locals and the westerners continued until my countrimin succumbed to the 'conquest of the gun' and worked on their station. Under colonial rule they became a vital asset in the development of the Kimberley pastoral industry. Without black labour, those properties would have struggled and not even survived.

Further south, under the direction of Western Australian government surveyor Alfred Canning, the Canning Stock Route opened in the early 1900s. A conduit to muster East Kimberley stock to southern markets. It ran from Billiluna Station south of Halls Creek to the township of Wiluna in the goldfields, from where stock was loaded onto trains for Geraldton, Midland and Fremantle. Stock routes deliberately ran close to desert people's precious soaks, which were made into wells, rendering their long-established water sources inaccessible.

The route bridged many Aboriginal countries. Cruel tactics were used to force desert people to reveal their water sources. Shackled together at night and given salt, they became thirsty and had little choice but to lead Canning's men to the water. Furthermore, gudia men pursued their women and stole

Aboriginal property. Our people fought back. They vandalised at least half the wells by removing the buckets and setting timber casings alight, succeeding in stopping the interlopers for several years. The route recommenced in the 1930s.

On our Nigena homelands, gudia men engaged in sexual interactions with Aboriginal women, either by consent or rape. Mixed-descent children began appearing on the Kimberley landscape where few gudia men accepted responsibility for them. The 1886 *Aborigines Protection Act* didn't protect these children. That piece of legislation was concerned with the employment of Aboriginal people. Teenagers from the age of fourteen could be employed as cheap labour, while kids as young as six were known to have been working for the pastoralists. Aboriginal workers were not entitled to any cash pay. Just flour, sugar and tea.

Concern about the abuse mounted and pressure brought on by worried humanitarians triggered a survey into the administration of Aboriginal peoples. Of particular interest was the interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Both the state government and missionaries were concerned that the exploitation and mistreatment of Aboriginal women was resulting in growing numbers of 'half-caste' children. So they engaged in passionate discussions about who our mob should and should not have relationships with.

A dislike for Asian people was evident, therefore it was relationships between Asian men and Aboriginal women that worried the 'powers that be' the most. Consequently, their debates manoeuvred around the ideology that everyone must live like white people. Speak their language. Adapt to their ways. And marry lighter skinned people until Australia was

rid of dark-skinned people. Such deliberations continued from the 1930s to the 1970s and beyond. An attempt to control cohabitation between races had, in part, been the catalyst for the *Aborigines Act 1905* (WA). The new rules, under the guise of protectionism, allowed for tighter controls over our people well into the twentieth century. The 1905 Act, as it became known, gave government officials the legal right to remove 'mixed-descent' children from their families.

A new position came with the act – the Chief Protector of Aborigines. This position covered the whole of Western Australia. To help him do his job, the Chief Protector could appoint proxy protectors, who were often policemen. So began a long and uneasy relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the police. From that time on, my grandparents came under the control of a government authority who plotted with missionaries to take children from their families. Not surprisingly, little attention was ever given to 'full-descent' people. They were expected to just die out.

In 1907 Charles Frederick Gale became the Chief Protector in Western Australia. On being told there were numerous 'half-caste' children in the Kimberley, he reacted by claiming that they would be better off on missions. He even assumed that 'mixed-descent' kids were more intelligent than 'black' kids. He had no qualms about taking them from their mothers. His travelling inspector for Aborigines, James Isdell, in the late 1890s claimed, 'I would not hesitate for one moment to separate any half-caste from its Aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief might be at the time. They soon forget their offspring.'

Consequently, my mixed-descent grandparents were legally taken from their black mothers. Snatched by police off Nigena country, both were very young when they were displaced to Kimberley Catholic missions in 1909. Catholicism would profoundly impact their descendants, denying us the inherent right to embrace our own Nigena culture and language.

My Granny's bush name was Jira, which in all likelihood sounded like Sara, because that is the name that first appeared in reference to her in a report from Beagle Bay to the Chief Protector. But there is no 'c' nor 's' in Aboriginal languages. Jira was sent to the Pallottine mission at Beagle Bay on Nyul Nyul lands north of Broome and given the western name 'Phillipena'.

Grampa, too, had his bush name, 'Yoolya', meddled with. His name is spelled as 'Eulla' in most of the official documents – the way in which Europeans heard it. Yoolya was taken to the Benedictine mission at Drysdale River on the northernmost tip of Western Australia and given the name 'Fulgentius' after the incumbent bishop, Fulgentius Torres.

Many years later, when asked by her daughter Edna how she came to be at Beagle Bay, Granny began to cry, '... they locked us in Derby jail house'.

CHAPTER 1

Removed

They listened to their distraught mothers
call them from near the cell

Jimmy Casim was my maternal great-grandfather. A teenager when he sailed into Fremantle from India in the 1880s, he was a deckhand on an Indian cargo vessel with his uncle as the bosun. He had come at a time when ships from the subcontinent made several trips a year, back and forth from Karachi. They brought teams of Afghan cameleers and their camels to Australia for the opening up of the inland and it was on one of those trips that Jimmy became ill. With his uncle's prompting, he jumped ship to get help. The young seafarer stayed in Western Australia and, like others from his part of the world, he merged into a life of indentured labour.

Nygumi (grandfather), as his grandchildren called him, ventured north into Ngarluma country in the Pilbara to the coastal town of Cossack. There, tin shacks and sturdy stone buildings were burgeoning in hilly outcrops that fronted a seemingly tranquil Indian Ocean. In the bustling town he blended

well among the 989 Malays and 493 Aboriginals, many who worked the vessels that searched for pearl shell off the coast. With a large Asian population, Cossack had its own Chinatown and Nygumi settled into working on the dry docks.

By 1886 the Pilbara pearling industry was flagging. As fewer boats operated from Cossack, a parliamentary select committee recommended its closure as a pearling hub and the industry moved to Broome. Nygumi followed. He had an uncle there who employed him as a pearl diver. In Broome he was able to embrace his Muslim faith in the company of Muslim Malays and impassioned Indonesians.

But it was Aboriginal communities that he was drawn to. Nygumi found work as a camp cook at Yeeda Station, a 700,000-acre lease 180 kilometres north of Broome on the Mardoowarra in Nigena country. It is where he met the beautiful Muninga, a Nigena woman. They had a daughter in 1900 and called her Jira – she was my Granny. Born on the banks of the Mardoowarra, her birth date, 1 January, is one that was given to Aboriginals in the early days of colonisation. Either that or 1 July.

My families took for granted how the majestic Mardoowarra with its many tributaries weaved its way through Nigena country and beyond. They knew that Woonyoomboo, a Nigena creation ancestor, was the first to travel along the Nigena section of the river before he became a rufous night heron. He can still be heard, singing in the trees. Together, my great-grandparents watched and listened and Nygumi came to appreciate my great-grandmother's culture. Local creation stories hold our Nigena history and they explain our people's relationship to the river, to the land and to our liyan (deep feelings). Given his own Muslim

beliefs, Nygumi had respect for Muninga's customs. He came to revere her people's inherited connection to the Mardoowarra and their Nigena homelands which had never been lost to them.

My great-grandmother lived happily enough with their extended family, which included Numingil, Muninga's sister, and her daughter, Gypsy, who was just a little younger than my Granny. Living in the camp too was Eddy Yedewarra, one of Muninga's Nigena husbands. During the day while the men mustered stock and tended to station jobs, the children fished with their mothers, 'steering clear of crocodiles', Granny laughed years later. Most evenings everyone joined in ceremonies, dancing and singing. The families sometimes lived in the bush, especially during Lore time, to the west and to the north of the Yeeda homestead – a way of life that was gradually being denied them as pastoralists moved sheep and cattle onto Nigena lands. The women sometimes walked the 20-kilometre track to Derby to find work, the kids playing along the way, hiding in the bush, collecting bush food, chattering and laughing.

At Mayalls Well (Myalls Bore), a few kilometres south of the town, they rested. Nearby was a large potbelly boab tree that had been used to lock up Aboriginal prisoners in the late 1800s. Oral histories reveal that it was used as a jail cell right up into the twentieth century. It mystified Muninga and Numingil that their countrimin had been imprisoned inside or chained to the outside of that tree.

The prisoners had arrived there after walking for hundreds of kilometres from the east and from the north, harnessed together with chains. Suffering weight loss and with deep wounds from chains around their necks, shoulders and wrists, the men had

been forced to walk for days along inland routes. Constable Pilger at Fitzroy Crossing, 160 kilometres to the east, boasted about the cat-o'-nine-tails he used to flog blackfullas. Escorted to Derby by mounted, armed police to be sentenced for crimes that no-one understood – except for gudia – they were deported south to jails at Irremugadu (Roebourne) and Wadjemup (Rottnest Island). They perished off-country.

It was mid-1909 when Muninga and Numingil, while working for Quan Sing, a Chinese shop owner, had their children stolen from them. As they raked and cleaned up the yard and the children played outside, two policemen came by on horse and cart, on the prowl for 'half-caste' kids. With them were two Aboriginal offsiders. Under the rules of the *Aborigines Act 1905* it was legal for the police to just snatch kids who weren't of 'full descent' from their parents. The law had come about because colonists and humanitarians were of the mindset that the half-black, half-white kids would be better off away from their black mothers and brought up on missions. Furthermore, they claimed that the children would be better protected from exploitation by pastoralists.

The police, helped by their offsider who spoke in Nigena, lured the little girls to the cart with lollies. Realising what was going on, their friend Albert ran away and hid as they excitedly hopped up onto the cart. 'Come on Albert', they called after him, 'we going ride.' Albert watched from behind the shop and when all was clear, he ran to tell Muninga and Numingil. Their hearts sank. They knew. Word had reached them too late to protect their children.

The girls were taken to the Derby lockup and given a crusty old blanket to lay on the grimy concrete floor of a caged cell.

Edna Fraser, Old Derby Gaol, 2015.
Each cell 7.5 m x 5 m © Kylie Gibson, photographer

Together they huddled next to large iron loops that were fixed into the floor, where adult prisoners had been shackled and fed flour and water. Chained in gangs, our countrimin had been forced into hard labour to develop the town and were returned to the cells at night. In fact, the site was used as a prison up until the 1970s.

Frightened in the dark, Gypsy, who was still being breast-fed cried, 'Mumma nanya (breast),' while a scared Jira tried to keep her quiet, whispering, 'Shhh, leinju (policeman) coming.' Faces swollen and sticky with tears and dust, they clung to each other as they listened to their distraught mothers call them from near the cell. The police ignored the commotion.

Early the next morning they were boarded onto a tram and taken to the jetty. As the tram trundled slowly across the 2-kilometre stretch of barren marsh between the town and the jetty, they struggled to get away but a policeman held them so tightly their little arms hurt. Their mothers ran alongside shouting to them. Realising the hopelessness of the situation, Muninga fell to the ground and picked up a rock. She smashed her head repeatedly until blood streamed down her face, down her arms and dripped from her fingers to the ground, blending into the red dirt. It was her way of grieving. At the jetty the children were put in the care of an Aboriginal woman from Queensland for the long boat journey to Beagle Bay Mission, southeast of Derby on the Dampier Peninsula.

In the early 1900s the Adelaide Steamship Company operated a fleet of twenty-seven stock and passenger carriers between Fremantle, the eastern states and the northwest. There were steam tugs, steam lighters and coal hulks. The ships that sailed along the Western Australian coast, serviced by local agents, also carried human cargo. Aboriginal prisoners and children who had been taken from their families were placed together in the cattle carriers. After all, it was the Department of Aborigines and Fisheries in Perth that made decisions about our people.

On a clear night in July of 1909, the SS *Koombana* manoeuvred its way through numerous small islands in the Buccaneer Archipelago heading to Derby on high tide. A brand-new, state-of-the-art passenger and cargo ship, it had only arrived at Fremantle from England in early 1909 to service the northwest ports. Now it was on its fifth trip to Derby in the same year.

Named after one of several properties owned by the Forrests, a pioneering family near Bunbury in the south, 'koombana' means calm and peaceful in Noongar, the Aboriginal language from the southwest. The SS *Koombana* berthed at the Derby jetty where passengers were greeted enthusiastically by the townspeople, who in turn were invited aboard. The visitors wallowed in the ship's luxurious decor, its elegant dining rooms and cabins, socialising until it was time for the ship to leave on its return voyage to Fremantle. Were the Derby folk even aware of the two terrified little girls in the lower decks next to countrimin in chains and a menagerie of plumped-up cattle, chickens and dogs to boot?

Numingil and Yedewarra followed the children while Muninga, too traumatised to go anywhere, agreed to stay in Derby. The two set out on the 300-kilometre trek from Derby to Beagle Bay. Walking through Yeeda Station on country they knew well, camping at Mount Jowlaenga and crossing the Fraser River, they were not short of sustenance – feasting on introduced stock. In Derby, Muninga pined for her daughter, who was never off her mind, and wondered when she might see her again. She waited in Derby, just in case Jira came back.

The journey by ship to Broome and then on the mission supply lugger to Beagle Bay terrified the bewildered little cousin-sisters. They had no idea where they were going or why they had been taken away from their mothers. At the mission they joined forty-four girls and forty boys from across the Kimberley. Called orphans, they were promptly baptised and given Christian names. Jira became 'Phillipena' and Gypsy became 'Francesca'.