

KAYANG & ME

This is a powerfully honest story. A story of family, land and identity. At its centre, Kayang Hazel, compassionate, wise and strong. A story to open your heart to.

Sally Morgan

Even before I'd finished *Kayang & Me* I knew the value of it and enjoyed learning and being enriched by both voices. Life stories told in both 'Noongar talk' by Hazel Brown, mixed with the award-winning style of her nephew Kim Scott demonstrate the significant role of oral history in learning about Indigenous Australia and, while presenting a family history, explore not only the complexity but also the evolution of Aboriginal identity and culture nationally.

Anita Heiss

Kim Scott is a descendant of people living along the south coast of Western Australia prior to colonisation, and is proud to be one among those who call themselves Noongar. His writing has won numerous awards and prizes, including two Miles Franklin Literary Awards. Kim's novels include *True Country*, *Benang: from the heart* and *That Deadman Dance*. He is currently Professor of Writing at Curtin University in Western Australia.

Hazel Brown is the senior elder of a large, extended Noongar family. She has worked as a rural labourer, was a member of Western Australia's first Metropolitan Commission of Elders, and is a registered Native Title claimant over part of the south coast of Western Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are respectfully advised that deceased people are referenced in this publication.

KIM SCOTT
HAZEL BROWN

KAYANG
& ME

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For Bob Pirrup Roberts and Fanny Winnery

Wilomin Noongar

I remember when they used to go hunting. Dad used to be late coming back to camp and the boys'd be wondering. I'd say, 'Oh, Pa won't be long.'

They reckoned, 'Oh, Pa mighta got drowned.'

And I'd say, 'No, he'll light a fire directly. When he come over the hill he'll light a fire and he'll show us.' And next thing you see smoke, and then — not long — Dad coming down the slope towards us.

That's how Noongar used to do it. Years ago they used to light fires to let people know where they were, you know.

Grandfather Dongup was bringing cattle up from Hopetoun. He said he saw the smoke those Noongars made, top of the hill, and there musta been a lot of them. They was going for a meeting, exchanging women or something like that I suppose. When he came back, there was no-one.

See, most of 'em travelled from Jerdacuttup, just to go and get killed at Cocanarup.

My name is Hazel Brown. I was born on the ninth of November 1925, at a place called Kendenup. My mother and her first husband, they were working down there. A lot of people used to trap possum you know, for the pelts.

I was born in an old packing shed. Years ago no women had their babies in hospital, you weren't allowed to. They had their babies in the bush.

My mother was Nellie Limestone from Marble Bar; she was born at Lydon station. Her mother was Mary Williams, a full-blood Aboriginal from the Pilbara district. Her father was supposed to have been a white man.

My mother was one of the Stolen Generations. She was sent to the Carrolup Native Settlement — now called Marribank — near Katanning. She was known there as Nellie Limestone, but there were too many Nellites around so they changed her name to Sybil when they made her get married.

She used to run away from there. Jack Cornwall was doing work for a farmer at Boscabel, in the Beaufort River district, and my father was working for him. Jack had a horse and cart, and he used to give the girls a lift to where the men were.

When the white bosses from the settlement went after the young girls they took a black tracker with them, and the policeman in charge of Katanning police station, he went too. Mum and Aunty Anne Morrison were caught, and Dad Yiller and Mum were made to get married. That was in 1920.

My father's name was Freddy Roberts. Yiller was his Aboriginal name. He was born at Jacup, a place between Ravensthorpe and Jerramungup in the Fitzgerald area. He died in Katanning District Hospital in the year 1930, on the thirtieth of November.

My mother had two children by then, and after Fred Yiller died, well me and Lenny were going to be sent to Carrolup Settlement, so Fred Yiller's brother, Fred Tjinjel Roberts, married my mother. That was Noongar way, see. She was accepted into the family, and that meant her husband's brother looked after her when the husband died.

There were three Freds in the family. There was the eldest brother Yiller, and there's Booker, and there's Tjinjel, and they all went by the name of Fred, so there was no one Fred; there was Fred This and Fred That. But my father was Fred Roberts, and that's the name we've been known by, and then I married Harry Brown and that's when I became a Brown.

I spent my early years in the Needilup and Jerramungup districts, and the first language I was taught was Noongar talk. I only ever spoke the language of our people from the south of the state. I was never taught the language of my mother's tribe.

I grew up with my brothers and sister among our father's full-blood relations. When we were young we always kept the laws of our people who were traditional people. We mostly lived in bag camps — you know, like tents made out of old hessian bags and canvas and that — and we slept on rushes or bushes for our beds. We ate the bush food of our people, too.

I was just seven years of age when I was taught to track, snare, hunt and gather food. I was also taught how to use a gun. I shot rabbits, parrots, ducks, and at the age of ten I shot my first kangaroo. My teacher was my father's brother, who became a father to me.

I never had to shoot the possum because I climbed the tree and pulled it out by the legs or tail. We often went hunting for mallee hen nests and if there were eggs in the nest we would

always leave one or two for the mothers to look after.

I was taught about the laws and the traditions of the people of our region by my parents and elders. Our people were mostly kept together by Henry Dongup and Waibong Moses. They and the other old people made my second father marry my mother.

My father's father was called Bob Roberts (also known as Pirrup), and his mother was called Monkey, a woman who came from the Ravensthorpe district. My second father was also the son of Pirrup, and his mother was Emily Mudda Dabb.

Most of my grandmother Monkey's family were massacred some time after 1880 by white people at a place called Cocanarup, a few miles from the Ravensthorpe townsite. Some of Granny Emily's people died there too.

My grandfather Pirrup's father was Bobby Roberts, whose family came from the Hunter River, about five miles from Bremer Bay. Great-grandfather Bobby's mother was of the Wilomin people.

Wilo, that's us. We're Wilomin. A long-legged people. Well, we weren't all long-legged, but that's what they called our people. Like, Lenny had the long skinny legs ... Me, I got the name Yaakiny, 'cause I was the slow one. Turtle, that's me. They would be quick quick while I'm lagging and I'm coming behind ...

*

My name is Kim Scott. Not long-legged at all, I'm following even further behind Aunty Hazel.

My father, Tommy Scott, was the only surviving child to an Aboriginal woman who died when he was ten years old, after which

his Aboriginal grandmother continued to raise him until his Scottish father arranged boarding schools and even a succession of stepmothers. He still occasionally saw his grandmother. Sometimes, too, an aunty or uncle looked after him.

When I was a child my father told me to be proud I was 'of Aboriginal descent'. Perhaps it was the silence surrounding his words that made them resonate as they did; I'd certainly heard no such thing anywhere else in my life, certainly not in my reading or schooling. There didn't seem much in the way of empirical evidence to support my father's words. A child, and unable to either calibrate injustice and racism or identify its cause, I sensed the legacy of oppression.

I remember a young man running to my father for help in escaping a family feud, crying that 'they' were gunna get him and chop his legs off. A baby — one among a series of several entrusted to us by a neighbouring elder while the parents were unable to care for them — died after being accidentally placed in a bath of scalding water soon after returning to his home. Peering through the fly-screen, for the first time I saw my mother sobbing uncontrollably.

Most of Aunty Hazel's writing in this book comes from transcriptions of tape-recordings we did together. That method created some difficult decisions for us, most of which could be reduced to the particular problem of how to capture the distinctive nature of her speech while allowing it to be relatively smooth to read on the page. For example, Aunty Hazel says 'Jerrymungup' or 'Jerry' when she's talking about the place most books and maps label 'Jerramungup'. She'll often articulate 'nineteen hundred and twenty-two', not 'nineteen twenty-two', and she says 'coulda', not 'could've'. Generally, we've chosen the variant more common on the printed page: 1922, not 1900-and-22; Jerramungup, not Jerrymungup.

Authentically reproducing Aunty Hazel's sound in print became

even more of a problem when she used Noongar language. Partly that's because the English alphabet doesn't do justice to the sounds of Noongar, but also because we've used the spelling and orthography recommended by the Noongar Language and Cultural Centre's 1992 dictionary, and this doesn't fit the south-east dialect as well as it might. The sounds represented by the letters 'b' and 'd' are much more like 'p' and 't', for instance, and there's a greater frequency of middle diphthongs and relatively few vowels at the end of words; the word for water, for instance, is more like 'ka-ip', in contrast to what is usually written as 'kep', or 'kepa' in other dialects.

Mostly, we've opted for compromise in the interests of communicating more widely. We've used very little Noongar language in this book anyway, not only for the above reasons, but because it's a language that's best transmitted orally. You need to listen.

A further problem with putting speech into writing arose when we looked at transcripts of interviews with Aunty Hazel conducted more than twenty years ago, in which she used expressions like 'people of colour' or 'coloured people' more often than the terms 'Noongar' or 'Aboriginal', and makes a distinction between 'half-castes' and 'full-bloods'.

When I read those terms it made me think about how the language we use, and the ways of thinking it encourages, can change over even a relatively short time. I wondered if something of that distinction between 'half-caste' and 'full-blood' was implicit in my father's words when he said 'Aboriginal descent', and whether it also existed in my own thinking as a child. I know I identified with those Aboriginal people who were achieving in the society I knew and felt a part of: the boxer, Lionel Rose, who also recorded country and western songs; Jimmy Little, the musician; a range of Australian Rules footballers like Sydney Jackson, Polly Farmer and Barry Cable.

I gravitated to what I thought might be the literature of 'coloured people', and naively read Kipling's *Kim*, devouring it without being conscious of the identity confusion of its protagonist and the strange cultural appropriation taking place. I remember my father reading a series of novels in a sub-genre typified by one titled *Mandingo*, and although I don't recall ever seeing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* it's plausible that my father — since I, in my innocence, could identify with Kipling's Kim — may even have felt an affinity with Uncle Tom. Well, he may have been an uncle to some, but he was father to me.

I also remember, not long before he died, seeing a copy of *Poor Fellow My Country* opened beside my father's empty chair. I'd guess my father could identify with Prindy, but where was the tribal elder to guide him?

My father and I didn't have a lot of conversations, which is probably why I remember those we did have, like when — at six or seven years old — I came home bruised and bleeding and cursing two other Noongar boys — strangers — I'd clashed with after they'd stolen my younger brother's bicycle. 'Coons,' I was calling them.

My father shut me up. Don't talk that way, he said. People are people. And for the first time he told me to be proud I was 'of Aboriginal descent'.

Perhaps my father's words resonated so strangely simply because, in 1960s south-western Australia, it was hard to articulate pride in Aboriginality. My father wanted me to have something more like a faith, a psychological conviction. It was not something easily put into words. He said to be proud, that was the important thing, but he lacked the vocabulary, didn't have the right stories at hand. It's a continuing problem I think, this struggle to articulate the significance and energy of a specific Indigenous heritage.

In the mid 1960s it was put to me in terms of being proud to be 'of Aboriginal descent' and 'part-Aboriginal', but not much more than ten years later I was a young adult living and working among Aboriginal people of south-western Australia — Noongars — who repeatedly said, 'You can't be bit and bit. What are you, Noongar or wadjela?'

It was a political imperative about the need to commit, to align oneself with either white or black, and I felt compelled to obey. There didn't seem to be any choice, not if I wished to be among Noongars. But even as I winced at the phrase 'Aboriginal descent' and learned more of our shared history, our story of colonisation, I was not always confident of my acceptance by other Noongars.

My father died in his thirties. Young as he was, he was several years older than his mother had been at the time of her death.

I didn't grow up in the bush. There was no traditional upbringing of stories around the camp fire, no earnest transmission of cultural values. The floor of the first house I remember was only partially completed, and my three siblings and I, pretending we were tight-rope walkers, balanced on the floor-joists spanning the soft dirt and rubble half a metre below us.

We moved to a government house on a bitumen street with gutters running down each side, and even though the street came to an end, the slope ran on and on through patchy scrub and past the superphosphate factory, the rubbish tip, the Native Reserve.

Individuals were fined for being on the reserve, and fined for being in town. Their crime was being non-Aboriginal in the one place and Aboriginal in the other, after legislation was refined in the attempt to snare those who — as the frustrated bureaucrat put it — 'run with the hares and hunt with the hounds' and to trip them as they moved to and fro across a dividing legislative line.

My father was mobile that way, always moving.

From the city where he'd reached adulthood, he moved back close to the country of our Noongar ancestors, and worked on the roads as 'leading hand' in a gang of mainly Aboriginal men. Returning home after being away from us for ten days of every fortnight, he usually took us camping. He wanted to be a professional fisherman, and we rattled along the coast in a battered 4WD and trailed nets from a dinghy in the country of our countless ancestors, 'going home' together. We kids helped with the nets, cleaned fish, and even hawked them around the neighbourhood. My mother broke up blocks of ice with the back of an axe, and we carefully layered fish and ice into crates which my father then loaded onto a train bound for the city.

One among other Noongar and wadjela children running barefoot in a suburb a skip, hop and a step from the reserve, I was only ever at the fringe of a community which showed all the signs of being under siege.

I knew my father's mother and grandmother had lived around Ravensthorpe and Hopetoun, two very small towns in the very south of Western Australia. Hopetoun, on the coast, was the port for Ravensthorpe, some fifty kilometres inland, and were it not for an explosion of mining which began in the very late nineteenth century and lasted a decade or so into the twentieth, it would probably never have existed. Hopetoun is a little too exposed for a port; the sealers and whalers and ships of the colonists mostly preferred bays either side of it for the shelter they provide from the persistent southerly winds which chop and toss the sea onto the white beach. As Ravensthorpe and its mines dwindled, so too did Hopetoun.

I was born in the capital city of the state, far away and about sixty years after the proclamation of those southern towns, and returned to Albany, the largest town on the south coast, to do my schooling

before moving away again for further education. When I began teaching and working among Noongar people, I only met one or two who knew my grandmother's name. The few who remembered my dad didn't know his family.

Some of my father's relatives were visibly Aboriginal, but lived apart from the wider Noongar community. It was awkward to ask certain questions of them. One such uncle insisted that his mother and her forebears were not from the south-west but, 'South Australia, she was from South Australia.'

So I knew very few members of my extended Indigenous family, and they were either ashamed to admit to their Aboriginality, or — like my father had perhaps been — too diffident to loudly identify themselves as Aboriginal. Maybe they thought the real Aboriginal people were the down-and-outs, the losers. They might have had mostly negative understandings of what it was to be Aboriginal, and less sense of kinship with the local Indigenous community than even I had, courtesy of my father and people we knew.

Clearly, I had very few close relations who identified themselves and were accepted as Noongar. We must originally be from some place else I thought, and not from around those tiny towns of Hopetoun and Ravensthorpe.

Names plucked from a family tree and the knowledge that my father had attended a particular mission school led me to a remote Aboriginal community with which the mission was associated. I applied to be a teacher at the government school there, hoping to connect with Indigenous family with roots in country and community.

I was not successful. The name was coincidental, but the disappointment of not finding the country or people I came from fed my first novel, which I wrote with the lyrics of Midnight Oil's

'Dead Heart' stuck to the wall beside my desk. The chorus of that song is defiant — how we carry the true country in our hearts, and how our ancestry cannot be broken — but I think the novel emerged from the chasm between the affirmation of those lyrics and the title's sorry tale of loss. 'True country' indeed.

Some years later, co-ordinating an Aboriginal bridging course at a local university, I wanted to run the annual 'cultural field trip' in Noongar country, led by Noongar people. Many of the students weren't happy with this, since the alternative was a trip to exotic and warmer destinations, and most thought that there was only 'oppression culture' left in Noongar country — not 'high' culture, not creation stories, language and songs. I worried they were right, but believed that such a course of study in south-western Australia had to acknowledge the primacy of Noongar people and culture. I heard of a family group needing to test the logistics of a 'cultural tourism' enterprise they were developing, and volunteered our group as their clients.

We were not to know it but our guide and elder, Mr Ralph Winmar, was in the last year of his life, and so we were among a privileged few to be properly introduced to the intimacies of his home country, and welcomed with the songs and language of its ancestral spirits.

He sent a group of us to climb the rocky side of that creative spirit, the Waakal — or at least that transformed remnant of it fenced within a small rectangle of the wheat belt somewhere around Quairading and York. On the climb we tasted water running from the wound left by an ancestral Noongar's spear and, standing high on the Waakal's fossilised back, looked out over a tractor describing small futile circles in the paddock below us, and heard the bleating of distant tiny sheep. The breeze in our faces, and the air entering our lungs did not — despite the cleared paddocks and the

fences and sheep and tractor — belong to any place known only as 'the wheat belt'.

It seemed true; an old spirit rests in the land and we, its people, are the catalyst of its awakening. It's a potential, a possibility, that still excites me.

I mentioned to one of the elders accompanying us that my Aboriginal family had lived in Ravensthorpe. She said, 'Oh, I hope not, for your sake.' I didn't know what she meant. Someone else suggested I go see Aunty Hazel. They reckoned Hazel Brown knew everyone who'd lived around Ravensthorpe.

Aunty Hazel's genealogical knowledge almost failed her the first time I rang, and back then I didn't realise how rare this was. With only the sound of my voice over the telephone, my surname, and a rough idea of where my family had lived, she nevertheless named my Scottish grandfather's brother and a Noongar woman *he'd* partnered. 'You must be their grandson,' she said.

'No ...'

'Tommy Scott; was he your father then?' she asked.

When I came to visit she held her arms out to me. Small and wiry, she's quite fair-skinned. We had those characteristics in common, anyway. Two fair-skinned and sinewy people, embracing.

People are happy to say of each of us that, well, walking down the street, you wouldn't know ... They look like a wadjela, you wouldn't know they were a Noongar.

Wadjela Noongar was the term Aunty Hazel used when she explained, rather than introduced me, to one of her adult grandchildren. Whiteman Noongar: it's a phrase with subtle increments of meaning which range, depending on tone and context, all the way from 'one of us' to 'one of them'.

Aunty Hazel knew of my youngest brother through her son and

grandson. And yes, of course, she remembered my father: Him and her man Harry Brown used to drink and chase women together. Grinning wryly, she said they thought they were a couple of deadly *bandji* men — meaning sexually promiscuous.

Your father was my cousin, she told me. She remembered him bragging about his Aboriginal relations when he was drinking with a lot of people camping with her family in Borden. Aunty Hazel said he used to be at their camp all the time when he was working on the roads out that way, not long after he'd moved back from the city. When she asked her father Fred Roberts — Pa Tjinjel — who this man's family was, Pa Tjinjel said, 'He's our people, but wait for him to ask.'

My father never did. Too proud, maybe. I think I understand how he wanted others to claim and embrace him. He thought it was enough to have known his grandmother, some uncles and aunts, to have a general awareness of cousins. Perhaps he didn't want to humble himself — or risk rejection. I understand that. He was drinking, he was bragging.

Of course, in other situations it wasn't wise to boast about Noongar family, or even mix with them. It was a crime, and no-one would choose to have the law applied to them the way it did to Noongar people back then.

Aunty Hazel remembers my fair-skinned father among Noongars even though, like herself, he would have been able to move in white society in a way that other Noongars could not, and I guess that gave him an advantage. It's something Aunty Hazel and her brother Uncle Lomas talk about: the difference between being a Noongar with white skin and one with black skin. Not because of anything inherent, but because people treat you according to the degree to which you are recognisably 'Aboriginal'. That was true in the past, and still is.

Why didn't Pa Tijnjel offer the information? I guess because being asked was an acknowledgement of his authority, and a way of paying respect to him. He probably knew fair-skinned Noongars who'd turned their backs on their families and accepted the imperatives of white law.

Aunty Hazel seemed pleased I'd come to her now.

I'd visit, and she'd be raking the dry yard of her suburban government house, or hanging out laundry, or solving some family problem. For most of the time we spent on this manuscript two of her adult grandchildren — Milana and Clinton — lived with her. Both are schizophrenics. There were great-grandchildren in the house too, including little Brayton, whose frail heart was expected to sustain him for only a few years more.

When Aunty Hazel was seventy-five years old she heard that a grand-daughter, Lindley, had left her violent partner and was in a hospital in New South Wales, and that welfare had taken the children. Aunty Hazel organised funding and flew across the continent to bring mother and children back, even though it meant more people to care for in her little home.

An adult nephew, Buddy, injured in a collision between a truck and his motorcycle, was in her care for the last twenty-four years of his life. His was one of the first Noongar funerals I attended as family and, even then, I had to be introduced to almost everyone.

I remember suggesting to Aunty Hazel that she record the sorts of things she knew — the genealogies, the language, the sites and stories and history.

'Go on then,' she said.

I think she was enjoying some of the attention *Benang* was receiving, and especially the gossip about whose family I belonged to.

Recounting her recent visit to an office of Indigenous bureaucracy she suddenly said, 'You know, some of them there don't reckon you're Noongar,' and burst into laughter. I was taken by surprise, and couldn't see that it was something to laugh about. She continued leafing through the pages of a transcript I'd returned to her and then suddenly looked up and asked if I thought we could make a book together.

'We can try,' I said.

I'd often wedge a tape-recorder between us wherever we sat; it might be in the living room among various heaps of fresh laundry, an electric bar heater glowing in the winter gloom. Other times we sat out in the sun on a bush-timber bench her son Eric had built. There were nearly always children about, and on the tapes their conversation and games often accompany our voices.

Sometimes, other visitors looked at me twice, clearly thinking 'Who? Wadjela?' but once I was introduced the tension dissipated.

Aunty Hazel is quite deaf, and I'd have to shout to be heard. Even then she closely watched my face as I spoke. So mostly I'd listen, nod, gesture. Sometimes we'd study notes I'd written up, diagrams and drawings, photographs and bits of books. Occasionally, someone listening would want to join in.

What did she want to talk about? Transcribing her voice, I noticed there were only passing references to things which are ordinarily regarded as momentous in an individual's life: cancer; a nervous breakdown, the time her lung haemorrhaged as she stepped from the train after having spent months away so that she only had time to kiss the family before returning to the hospital.

It wasn't these things she wanted to talk about.

Her grandson Ryan Brown told me how she had once called him over to her when he was whingeing about something or other and, lifting the edge of her shirt, told him to feel the side of her chest. His

hand entered a gaping hole in her ribcage where her ribs had been removed. Cancer. Decades ago.

Get over it, she was saying. No point feeling sorry for yourself. What did she want to talk about?

We looked at photographs, leafed through old 'Native Welfare' files, and I remember her turning away in disappointment and disgust at the record of my ancestor, Harriette Coleman, telling the police she was 'quarter-caste' not 'half-caste'. No self-respecting Noongar would ever do such a thing, so they say, and I felt ashamed of her lie. But now, knowing her audience and the consequences of being classified as 'Aboriginal' at that time, I understand the old lady's words.

It's the sort of behaviour that makes Aunt Hazel angry, but she reacted very differently to some ancestral Noongar names I'd fished from the archives. I offered, 'Wongin, or was it Wonyin?' Aunt Hazel sat up straight. 'Pinyan' gave her another injection of energy. And when I said, 'Winnery. Fanny Winnery,' she laughed out loud, and exclaimed, 'Granny Winnery!'

'Winnery,' she said, 'that's a Hunter River name. That's from the head of the Hunter River. Wilomin people.'

*

Old great-great-grandmother's old father used to shout like a curlew, and disguise himself to look like a curlew. And that's why that family called themselves Wilomin. Wilo, that means curlew, see? And actually they're a very shy bird. You'll hear them, but you'll very seldom see 'em. Unless you're very quiet. Very, very quiet.

Wilo, they got long legs, and there's only a bit of a bird on top, and they have this long neck, and they can flatten themselves down just like a piece of dry stick and they'll never

move. Even if you're watching them, they'll shut their eyes and you'll think they're a piece of rock.

Mrs Hassell — *My Dusky Friends*, you read that, unna? — called our people 'Wheelman'. 'Wilamen,' some say.

But we Wilomin.

Wilomin people used to communicate between Bremer and bottom side of Quaalup down that side, and they used to go to Bremer and they used to go to Doubtful Island, 'cause they travel around everywhere, see. And some of these people, they go down there and mix with other mob, see? They were friendly tribe, and that's where the wilo was, up the river, see?

But it's a funny thing Kim, years ago, 1947, there was Dad, myself, and his brother Malcolm, my husband Harry Brown, one of my cousins — Rita Dempster's brother Adrian Allen — and we had another boy with us, Dad's sister's grandson, Tommy Woods. We had a green ute, and it belonged to my old man. Well, Daddy said, 'Let's go up the Hunter River,' 'cause Harry had shotguns. See, go and shoot some ducks, 'cause plenty of ducks up there, the Hunter River.

We went so far, and then because the motor was low Harry was frightened to go any further because the bushes might pull the wires out.

'All right, leave the motor here.'

Harry had the shotgun and Uncle Malcolm had the .22, and we were gunna go for ducks, see.

Anyways, we got right in the swamp, freshwater, got right up there close, and just before we get towards where the old camps were, Daddy said, 'You gotta stop here now, and make a fire. You gotta make smoke and let 'em know that you're coming.'

So he cleared the ground and then he got a little bit of dry

grass and he dug a hole and he lit a fire. He had to be very careful, 'cause it was summertime and we didn't have any water.

The fire burned up and he chucked some green bushes on; and then the smoke, see. Soon as the smoke went up ... well, you shoulda heard the curlews, boy. Hear them singing out. They're singing out over there, and then on this side. All around us.

Weeee ... Weeeee ... Wilo wilo wilo.

And you know when they make a noise, and you're not used to it, that wilo cry can be very frightening.

I was amazed you know. We just stood there and looked at one another. How they made a noise, all around us.

Well, we looked at one another. Me and Tommy, we were scared. Shivers went up and down my back.

Daddy said, 'That's it, you're right. That's the Wilomin people; they're letting us know. We're right now.' And he just hit the two sticks together like that, and no more.

We heard 'em, but we didn't see one.

That's something I'll always remember, you know. When we heard them all around us. About eleven o'clock. It was just like a chorus, and it was most frightening.

They're letting us know that they know you're here. Like that old song, '*Wilo wang mia wang wo da badin kabin ngayn ...*' You heard that one? The curlew sound, you know, 'I wonder is it for me?' Like, lotta Noongars they think, oh, death bird, you know. But not us. Not we Wilomin. They speak to us.

But when we were kids we were dead scared, to hear them

in the night, you know. When we were living out in the bush, if we heard 'em, you just crawl in and pull the blanket over your head and you froze. You froze, you never moved.

*

It transfixed me, this story of spirits calling.

A Noongar name at the beginning of a sequence of English ones had enabled Aunt Hazel to connect me to a specific place on the south coast, not so far, as it happened, from Ravensthorpe and Hopetoun.

Wilomin Noongar: What does that mean?

Aunt Hazel reckons the wilo can completely camouflage itself. It closes its eyes and just lies there, motionless. You only see it when its eyes open.

An endangered species along the south coast, the wilo lays its eggs in the sand. As foolish as an artist, I thought; as vulnerable as someone 'of Aboriginal descent' forsaking camouflage and, with his eyes open, asking after his Aboriginal family.

My family didn't bequeath me a rich oral history, quite the contrary, but there was one story of a boy and his mother camped past the edge of the town of Ravensthorpe, sitting around the fire and hearing the curlews calling.

Wilo.

The boy asked the woman why those birds were doing that, making such a scary sound. She told him those wilo had seen him slouching and dragging his feet as he walked home from school, and they were jeering at him. She said he should remember to hold his head up. Walk like them, perhaps she meant, like a wading bird; deliberate, fastidious, proud. Don't slump like the defeated or dead, but have the poise of those surrounded by risk and habitually wary.

Aunty Hazel translated Wilomin as 'curlew-like', the curlew people; it's how she and her brothers and sister grew up thinking of themselves. They weren't familiar with other names, or the descriptions and boundaries that anthropologists and historians use to describe people of the region. Oh, they've since come to know something of the writings of Ethel Hassell, a member of one of the pioneering families of the region. And even as a child Aunty Hazel had heard of Daisy Bates, but not the names and descriptions Bates gave of Noongars. 'Kurin,' Bates says of those in the region Aunty Hazel calls traditional country, but then Bates also uses the name 'Wilu-wuk' — a reference to people associated with the curlew — and is rather vague about the area they inhabit. Norman Tindale, who gathered his information in the 1930s and seems to be accorded pre-eminent authority these days because of the extent of his documentation and its use in Native Title forums, labels the peoples of the approximate area discussed by Aunty Hazel as variously Koreng, Wudjari and Wiilman. Tindale was so confident of his demarcations that he identified a 'Boundary Rock'.

Different peoples? The same? Such things as dialects of a common language, ties formed by trade and intermarriage, 'skin' groupings, 'totems' and 'moieties' all imply various and shifting groupings, as do the differing experiences of colonisation within and between the missions, 'settlements', reserves, country towns and cities. Depending upon circumstances and temperament, there's a range of responses available along a shifting continuum of accommodation and adaptation, resistance and assimilation ...

Can any map, any one word, any one authority or committee do more than approximate who were, and are, the people indigenous to a particular region?

Before meeting Aunty Hazel I'd followed a trail through the archives — a trail remarkable merely for its existence considering the decades when the births of Noongars, even those with white fathers, were rarely recorded. The trail led to an area of the south-east coast of Western Australia where my Indigenous ancestors had lived. The ocean runs along one edge of that country, and at other boundaries it blurs into country that the archives and political maps, with their love of demarcation and frontiers, cannot always be precise about. What sub-group of Noongar is this, I wondered. Or is it Ngadju, even Mirning, territory?

Researching *Benang*, I was also looking into family history, and one phrase kept appearing: 'the first white man born' in such and such a place. It was in countless local histories, and in my notes I reduced it to the ugly initials, FWMB.

A book written by an early twentieth-century authority on Aboriginal matters — A O Neville — offered a visual variation on FWMB in a photograph of three figures captioned:

Three generations (reading from Right to Left). 1. Half-blood — (Irish Australian father; full-blood Aboriginal Mother). 2. Quadroon Daughter — (Father Australian born of Scottish parents; Mother No. 1). 3. Octaroon Grandson — (Father Australian of Irish descent; Mother No. 2).

It could almost be a family photograph, but what family would describe itself that way?

Perversely, the phrase 'first white man born' energised me. As alienating and hostile as the words were, I was familiar with the language.

I detected another recurring phrase: 'the last full blood aborigine'.

Yes, there it was in *Pioneers of the Ravensthorpe and District*, and again in Ravensthorpe and Hopetoun's *Visitor Map and Information Guide*: 'The last full blood aborigine of the area, Geordie, died in 1944.'

The 'last full blood aborigine': LFBA.

FWMB, LFBA: the two sets of initials littered my notes. They seemed to insist on a boundary, a demarcation; the end of an old story, the beginning of a new one — and the concept of race was at the centre of it.

I must have dozed off in the archives, fallen like a mote of dust among the loops and wriggles on dusty parchment, because I remember feeling as if I had just surfaced and — blinking, looking around with watery eyes, suddenly too warm and solid in the stuffy airconditioning — wondering where I was.

Who I was.

'The first white man born?'

There's a poem by Ted Hughes — 'The Thought Fox' — which I read as about the act of creation, and in which writing is characterised as akin to hunting; an intuitive tracking and seizing.

Another poet, Charles Boyle, writes:

What do I know about fishing? Only the lure
Of its skills: patience and cunning; the arcane lore
Of tackle and rod, unravelling knots in the tangled net;
The practice of solitude ...

Perhaps I go too far, reading such words as a metaphor for writing, but beginning this book with Aunty Hazel I had only a vague idea of what lay within the language and stories she offered, and even less of what it might become. Was I patient? Perhaps. Solitary? Yes, in a way. Cunning?

I'd collected fossilised phrases like 'first white man born', and tossed them back into the sea of the archives in the hope of somehow making a firmer footing for myself. But with Aunt Hazel I stood on the sandy shore of my Indigenous heritage, and sensed something substantial and sustaining waiting for me to grasp, and yet the only means I had to do so was this laying out of words upon a page.

If writing is indeed comparable to hunting or fishing, then Aunt Hazel was showing me another way to go about it.

*

At certain times of the year the Noongar people used to go down and do their fishing. My little brother, Uncle Cedric, knew a lot about all this.

Groper fishing is more of a men's thing. Very, very sacred. Very, very quiet. Top skills for that, even with a line. If the groper sees you, you don't see him anymore. He's cleverer than the Noongar. Unless you crush and break up crabs to feed him and bring him back. If he's really hungry he'll come back. But, in our way, you can learn that.

A pack of goppers, a little more than twenty-five — that's the whole family. You catch them out, you got no more. So you catch what you need, and you leave the rest, specially the old fellas. Don't take more than one or two each.

Songs for that, for groper.

They used to sing old songs, not only for groper, for salmon too. Old Dongup and his brother old Winmir, they went and painted up and the other fellas made a fire, you know.

You light a fire on the beach and sing out boy — porpoise'll chase the salmon right into you. Hit the stick and sing like a

porpoise, talk and shout like a porpoise, and they'll chase all the salmon right in, and salmon, to get away, salmon'll jump right out of the water.

Porpoise, dolphins, don't matter what you call 'em, Noongar'll tell you what they do, they bring the salmon round, bring 'em round like dogs. The old fellas just sat back and whistled, threw the fire up, tapped the water ...

The two old boys standing there, they speared two or three salmon, 'cause them two old spearmen, they two old champions. Dongup and Winmir. We had a good feed of salmon from them.

That was happening for thousands of years, down our way. That was always handed down.

It happened at certain times of the year and the Noongars knew this, and they'd walk miles to get a feed of salmon. Fish that beach themselves. As well as feeding the young porpoise or dolphin, they were happy feeding themselves as well. That's the Noongars.

People still do it. At certain times of the year.

We were down there one year, at Cape Riche, when Eric was small and Buddy, too. It was in February, when the salmon season started, and you know what? I never seen so many dolphins!

There was me and Mrs Kunyo, and her two nieces and a few of my kids, and we watching for salmon. The boys had already taken one load away, and we were sitting down watching for more. Was a lovely afternoon too, oh about two o'clock, and it really wasn't that hot. The sea was just like glass you know, so calm.

And the next minute we see all these black things in the

water. Couldn't believe it, I was rubbing my eyes. 'What these things all coming?' and the next thing you see this big brown patch, that's all the salmon coming ... and these porpoises coming from everywhere. The water was teeming with 'em, 'cause they were following the salmon in.

Well, Cedric — my brother, you know, Uncle Chubbo — he was sitting the other side of me. Cedric reckoned, 'Oh, there's hundreds.' I'm sure there were hundreds. And the salmon were just jumping out of the water, they was that frightened, so many of them coming behind.

Well, they just come straight in like that. And, oh, too many. They weren't eating them, just chasing them. They had them salmon, and the salmon would go underneath, darting and leaping to get away from the porpoises.

Ngari, that's salmon.

And whales, there's songs for them too. Grandfather, old fellas, used to sing 'em. I never seen 'em do it, but they told me. And I heard 'em sing.

Whales. *Mamang*.

Whales come in close sometimes, you seen that, unna? Right next to the rocks. Like at Albany now, and Point Anne too. Well one old Noongar, he jumped onto one, and went like inside it. Slipped inside it like Jonah, unna? Like Jonah in the Bible musta done.

But the Noongar knew what he was doing, he *wanted* to be there, see. It wasn't an accident. Like he sung it to him and, well, not grabbed — can't say he grabbed it — but he controlled it, you know, he controlled the whale.

They dived, deep, deep; musta been sorta quiet and dark,

and the Noongar singing, singing this song to the whale and listening to its blood, its heart. They used to sing it, old fellas, not really to us, but for themselves see. I can't remember it, the song, but I remember dreaming it once, woke up ready to sing, but ... gone now.

Anyway, Noongar wanted it to take him, carry him Albany way, down there somewhere, lo-o-o-ng way from where he was.

When it come up, like every now and then it'd come up to the surface, and ... he was inside the whale, looking out when it come to the surface, you know. Like he *was* the whale ... see ocean everywhere, sun, birds maybe, and bubbles when they dived again.

He sung ... they used to sing the song. I think he met up with some womans, got 'em *boodjari*, brought 'em back this way to his family.

I can't remember, and I never said that one since ... oh, long time.

Sad, that I can't. Dreamt it once, that song; woke up with it in my head, but it went away again.