

KIMBERLEY

STORIES

EDITED BY
SANDY TOUSSAINT

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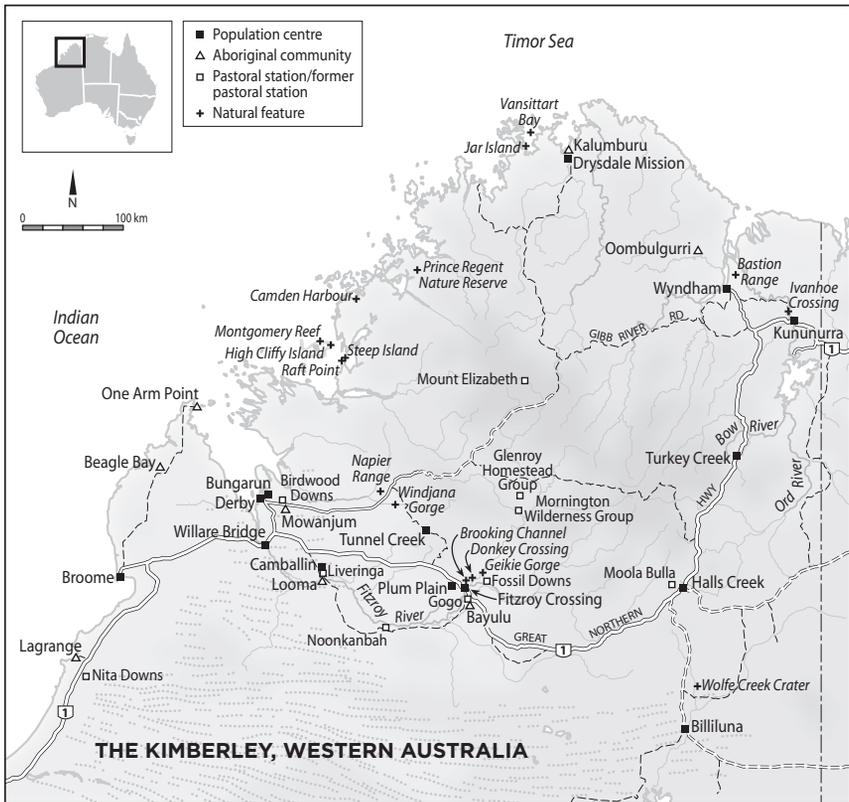
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PLACES NAMED IN THE TEXT



INTRODUCTION

SANDY TOUSSAINT

This book is about the Kimberley as a lived and loved place. It is also about writers and writing, and it is about readers and reading. It was not conceived with a singular view of the Kimberley, or of writers and readers, but with an interest in bringing the diversity of Kimberley life to a wide audience through the words, ideas and emphases of Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, both established and new. Whilst many contributors identify as authors of literary fiction or as poets, there are others for whom these titles don't easily fit – anthropologists, environmentalists, historians, journalists, and lawyers, who (especially on an occasion like this) also write creatively. Such a literary mix expands our view of what constitutes an author; it also tells us more about the variegated nature of a remote and iconic Australian setting, and the uniqueness of the Kimberley landscape as inspiration. Reader engagement with the texts, and their responses, will also vary, especially when a reader's familiarity with the Kimberley comes into play. Whilst some readers will experience a few 'Ah ha!' or 'Yes ...'

school where words and images free, rather than constrain, young and old in a provocative, revealing and respectful way.

Kimberley Stories shows the richness of people's intrinsic connections to each other, and to place. It explores the intricacies of nature, pockets of social distress and disquiet, and it reflects humour, joy and hopefulness. From every vantage point, these qualities tell us something about the nature of the Kimberley, as well as the lives and realities of those who live in the Kimberley, visit from time to time, or aspire to do so.

ARRIVING, DEPARTING, AND NEVER QUITE LEAVING

KATE AUTY

Exiting north from the Canning Stock Route just short of the Kimberley's Billiluna Community, you drive through a stand of desert oak. In the late afternoon sunlight the oaks sigh and seem to shiver. Even in midwinter the afternoon heat burns a fair skin: late into the day.

To your left you pass a tree stump out of which is carved a coolamon. Or the carving may be a western emblem, a survey marker. It is a little high, about midline. In the middle of the scar is carved '303'. In the Kimberley 303 can really only mean one thing. Firearm. Why anyone would have carved those numbers there is a mystery to us, and nothing in the map elaborates. Would the numbers be for someone leaving or entering the Canning Stock Route? We have just come off the Yiwarra Kuju, as Indigenous people call it, and along the route we have passed a lot of western death iconography: marble and timber headstones fenced by posts and rails. We know that equalisers occurred. For every white death, there is

at least one black. Administered by 303? Seems excessive in the bright light of the day.

The Canning is a stock, and now tourist, route. Even in its heyday, it was a rarely used folly supporting a north-western dream of a cattle empire of vast proportions. Named after a colonial explorer called Canning, the route has been a place of sorrow and death since its western incarnation. Canning chained Aboriginal men and women and forced them to take him to a series of native wells: a young woman was released because she kept soiling herself, a man, the 'Moth', who behaved madly, was also released. Others. A Royal Commission in 1908 found nothing untoward had occurred. Canning 'lost' a man called Tobin on the return journey south, close to a place where there are significant rock art sites, because of the taking of 'portmanteaux' of value to local Aboriginal people. Others, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal, lost their lives bringing cattle through. If there is a story about Indigenous people dying on the route it is usually regarded as a less important story than the one you can read in the non-Indigenous texts, of Canning the man and his triumph over nature. Up, over and after each successive sand dune as recent travellers we come to appreciate the comings and goings of those unaccustomed to the conditions but you also come to respect the ability of Aboriginal women, men and children to turn this part of the world into a place of subsistence. Before becoming a stock route the regularity of the residual chain of small-scale rock and sandy water holes

(or 'native wells' as Canning put it) suggests a pathway fitted for other people's purposes. These are ritual and mundane, real and challenging. And they were made all the more difficult by a group of white men riding people down, chaining them up and depriving them of water.

These reflections are about my last time in the Kimberley. It was not so long ago. Charlie and I came off the stock route and put our clothes in a roadside bin. We put our waste, a plastic ten-litre water container, twelve days' worth of rubbish, in the Halls Creek tip. We stopped at Fitzroy Crossing and ate, not knowing the date or even the time. Whilst we were away important things occurred in the wider world. The Beaconsfield miners in Tasmania came up for air, blinking at the light, hairy-nosed wombat-like. My first time was in the 1950s when I took a long drive from Shepparton, Victoria. I was in the parents' car, John and Jean's, a Citroen D19. The Nullarbor Plain (also known as the Nullarbor Highway) was still dirt and we spent cracker night at the Eucla telegraph station letting off rockets. We still have a photograph of my sister Kelly and me standing in the doorway of the station, sand piled up around our feet, in red velvet dresses made from curtains taken from the windows at Maude Street. The western highway up the coast was also dirt. My brother was there too, so we were three kids in the back of the car, John and Jean in the front, changing drivers when tired. I remember waves of bright parrots, and I remember that driving at night meant we lay in the back seat and watched the trees pass between us, and we watched the stars. Until there were

no trees. I have no memory of what I now know to be that long, long treeless stretch of road north to Port Hedland. Perhaps I slept?

We stopped in Broome for breakfast but didn't stay when the bacon and eggs arrived at the cafe table with the egg yolk covered by a huntsman spider. It was all legs and round body cooked into the yolk. In an exercise of undisputed defiance we left without paying. Heavy with disappointment, we turned again to the roadway food stock of dried apricots and puffed wheat.

I also have no memory of the road from Broome east up the Great Northern Highway to Wyndham. We propped in the car at the Ivanhoe Crossing, the river being in flood. When we crossed we stopped to stay for three years at the Ord River research station with its cotton and sugar cane, and with other non-Indigenous people from the south, from Holland, and from the Baltic states. The tin roofs of the technical assistants' quarters, out in the paddock, sent ripples of heat back into the sky, visible, destabilising.

The first house we stayed in at the Kimberley Research Station was nearly opposite the mess hall, over the road from the cook's house and facing the river. Trees included jacaranda and poinsettia. Not Indigenous. You had to walk up to the rim or back from the river to find eucalypts. In wildflower season the plain back from the river was a blanket of colour. After rain this was where we caught the tadpoles. The mess hall was to the west of the makeshift barbeque area where a man called Cruikshank used to air guitar 'El Paso' and

other western songs before challenging others to swim the river, which he did at least once. The barbeque area also doubled as the outdoor movie theatre where we could watch films brought up from Perth through a hail of fruit bats stimulated by the light.

The one-room school was one street back from the river, past the round concrete out-of-ground pool. My brother Peter could ride his tricycle across the bottom of the pool without needing to come up for breath. He and I started in the school after Christmas; Kelly was the baby and too young.

We moved to a house down the road from the school, past the technical assistants' quarters and next to some of the other scientists' houses. The Thompsons had a Peugeot and three kids. They also had a Dalmatian dog which seemed to have no personality in the way those dogs do. The mothers helped each other and shared. They ordered the supplies together and mostly laughed when the orders arrived out-of-sorts. One year a massive order of toilet paper arrived – dozens and dozens and dozens of rolls. Another time a laminex table arrived with unmatched chairs – a looming, disappointing drama, sorted by sharing.

The Aboriginal kids came over to school from the Ivanhoe Station. They could swim and run and jump better than we ever would. When we marched onto the Fitzroy Crossing oval for school sports and won nothing, Jean said in her wry way, 'You marched on so well, looking wonderful.' We probably did, with the pride kids have about those sort of straight-up things before they

realise it is mostly all bullshit.

The teachers took a longer journey than us, literally and figuratively, to get to the Kimberley Research Station School. Young and know-nothing they came up from Perth and, tour of duty done, returned again. It seemed to occur on an annual basis. One nice young woman who lived next door used to make iced coffee after school if we went for a visit. She didn't seem to stay as long as others. One played the melodica, a foolish instrument, but portable. One put silly work puzzles on the blackboard that the Aboriginal kids had no chance of solving – doubled-up words, bad spelling errors. In a cruel twist you had to get the puzzle before you could leave the room for lunch. The teachers always seemed hot, and often flustered. Sometimes an examiner arrived and then there were two teachers in the room. We wrote on slates. I was told, 'Kathryn I don't usually hit girls but I will make an exception for you.' I had been talking and giggling with Carol Gerrard in class. I thought Carol was wonderful. She was calm and poised and didn't seem to care about being chastised, whereas I did. In the schoolyard I seem to remember we mixed, but not well. I remember a white girl arriving who assumed control of games and associations and who invited me to her house in Kununurra for a birthday party which didn't take place. It wasn't even her birthday. The twenty-four mile round trip for my parents, a tense overnight stay and less friendly relations afterwards, is something I remember still. I also remember the Ivanhoe kids and the song 'You are my sunshine'. Years later Yorta Yorta people, Rochelle

Patten and Sandra Bailey, and I, sang it at a campfire at Cummeragunja by the Murray River in Victoria.

We were naughty and swore. When we returned south I knew more swearwords than any other kid in any class I entered. I learned them off one of the white girls. We played mothers and fathers down by the river, captured and lost the butterflies that somehow got through the chicken wire we used as their cage. In the absence of initiative-crushing parental supervision we put our legs in the water to tempt the salties that we knew to be there. We knew because we had seen one great long crocodile carcass laid out under the mess when someone shot it down by the pump station. We knew this too as Jean had a photo, taken over the width of the river, of a great large log-like thing which suddenly, surprisingly, slid into the water, graceful and racy.

That long journey to the Kimberley for one teacher ended as suddenly as it started. You remember these things in segments, as you see things that way when you are shamed enough to wish you could look away. You turn your head but are drawn back in. He arrived, like the others, without any serious notice being taken of the loss of the one who went before. He came to the school in the morning, being there before we arrived. He taught us 'see Betty run' and 'watch Spot jump' stories, and reading skills that, for the white kids, probably had meaning. I have no idea how long he was there before the unwatchable occurred. One of the young Aboriginal girls, fearful of asking to go to the toilet, wet her pants. The teacher was enraged. He forced her nose into her

pee. I think we all went home shortly afterwards. We told Jean. Jean told John. Other children may have done the same. I recall John and one of the other scientists getting into the Citroen, going to the teacher's house and driving him to Wyndham airport where he was told to wait for the next plane. For us, the children of the scientists, it was a clear illustration of what was good and bad, what was acceptable and what wasn't. For us nevertheless the weeks that followed were wonderful. Jean taught us 'A for apple' and 'B for bat' at home, with marvellous flexible school hours.

Then another teacher came and we all went back to school. We in the scientists' camp were clear about what had happened but I don't know whether the Aboriginal kids were. That was the way it was. Even when something proper or good happened we struggled with the means to convey the message. As children we were probably better at passing the message on than the adults but we weren't good at explaining stuff that happened yesterday.

Years later I think that this day might have passed unremarkably if it hadn't happened on the Kimberley Research Station, a scientific enclave, where some things were not tolerated. People from the south ... us, not great champions and always going to move on, we nevertheless made a difference, however insignificant in the great scheme of things, on that day.

When it came time to leave, the Whites in recently created Kununurra were still trying to segregate the newly opened school. Again scientists and the pedal radio threat of exposure stopped them. The school opened to

all. But the Kununurra Club remained segregated for years before the hotelier Karmapesci chained a member of the Green family and his mate to the bumper bar of his car and dusted them with flour overnight. The litigation over that conduct was the first time an Aboriginal person sued for damages and won. Others, outsiders, drove that case.

The Kimberley was a place where I grew out, not even knowing it was happening. Days like that day in the classroom have been formative for me. All of my Kimberley arrivals since have been followed by a departure, but the place leaves its impact and you never quite leave. Things happen in the Kimberley that don't happen in other places. The history is still, almost, and it is contemporary and raw. It is a place where a blend of people from elsewhere can and still does make a difference.

But so much will always remain unexplained and unexplored, like the number 303 carved into the stump of a Kimberley tree.