



Kimberley Society

Book Note

***The Bauhinia Tree: The Life of Kankawa Nagarra Olive Knight* by Olive Knight as told to Terri-ann White. [UWA Publishing](#), Crawley, WA, 2015, 108+ pages. Paperback, illustrated, maps, ISBN: 9781742585093, RRP \$22.99.**

Before coming across her words, the reader encounters the author in a glowing introduction and a series of photographs. A strong, talented woman, Olive Knight has travelled widely but lives in the [Wangkatjungka community](#) 100 kilometres south-east of Fitzroy Crossing. The community has approximately 180 permanent residents who are Walmatjarri, Wangkatjungka or Gooniyandi, strongly connected to their desert culture.

Olive is Gooniyandi: part Gooniyandi, part Walmatjarri. Born to a tribally married 15-year-old mother after an illicit liaison with a slightly older mission-educated “half-caste” lover, she was fortunate not to have been killed at birth. This rocky start to life continued when her widowed mother fled baby Olive’s white grandfather’s Bohemia Downs Station, taking her to the adjacent Christmas Creek Station. Fortunately, things improved after her mother remarried.

The narrative progresses chronologically, taking the reader through 70 years of highs and lows in which, apart from Olive’s schooling at the UAM Mission in Fitzroy Crossing and the cave school on Gogo Station, her early life does not seem to have differed much from that of her mother. It is sobering to think that Olive’s arranged marriage (at about fifteen years of age), post-natal depression and other hardships were probably also the lot of many other young women of her generation.

Better times came when Olive got together with Jim Bieundurry. They had four children and, while Jim trained and worked as a missionary, later immersing himself in the fight for Aboriginal rights, Olive became an interpreter and translator. Walmatjarri is her main language. She also speaks English, Creole, a bit of Gooniyandi (her childhood language) and a little bit of Bunuba.

In 1985, the homeland movement took the family to Jim’s country at Lake Gregory, Paruku. His heart then gave out and he died that June. Olive, overcoming the devastation of losing Jim and the support he had provided, studied with the Perth Aboriginal Medical Service and qualified as a health worker. That path took her back to the Kimberley where, after working in community health, she was elected as a chair of Wangkatjungka community.

Several constants have sustained Olive since childhood – her Christian faith and [singing and song writing](#) in which her traditional songs are integrated with blues. Through her artist son Clifton, Olive’s music came to the attention of photographer Russell James and actor Hugh Jackman. That led to friendships and international travel. The collaboration between Clifton and Russell is part of the story behind the creation of the socially-conscious business known as [Nomad Two Worlds](#).

One of the most interesting parts of the book (Chapter 11) deals with Olive’s effort to understand, and do something about, the foetal alcohol spectrum disorder affecting some of the children in her family and community. Like the surrounding chapters, which also touch on her aspirations and philosophy, it reveals how determination, energy and a desire to help others have contributed to her becoming a respected elder and a participant in many events, projects and programs.

At a time when media portrayal of indigenous people’s lives is often negative, this book offers a timely and refreshing perspective from a brave and articulate writer.

Cathie Clement