



Kimberley Society

Book Note

Wyndham Yella Fella by Reginald Birch. Magabala Books, Broome, 2003. Soft cover, 228 pages, illustrated, RRP \$24.95.

I am indebted to Billy Lee Tong of Wyndham for my signed copy of Reg Birch's interesting book. Looking at it as an historian, I found the book most valuable for its account of Wyndham history and the lives of people who are seen as members of the 'Stolen Generation'. Reg Birch's father Cyprian was taken from Quanbun Station to the Forrest River in 1922 and, because his last name was spelt wrongly in the records, he spent much of his life not knowing his real identity. In 1935, he married Polly Ogden who, like him, had been taken from her mother and sent to the Mission. Reg Birch was born there in 1940 and, after receiving his education in Wyndham, he embarked on a career that ranged from working with stock to working with tourists and writing short stories and poetry.

The book has no index, which is unfortunate when it contains so much information about people and places in the Kimberley. The arrangement of the contents helps to offset the absence of an index to some extent. The sections are headed 'Back to Wyndham' (pages 1 to 99), 'Kimberley Legends' (101–165), 'Stolen Piccaninny' (167–188), 'Kindred Spirits' (189–203), 'All still here' (205–213) and 'Yella Fella Dreaming' (215–228). After a well told sequence of yarns about life in Wyndham, 'Kimberley Legends' such as Bill Hurst (the 'pipeline cowboy') and Dave Rust provide more action. Alcohol, gambling and horse races crop up from time to time but the hard-living masculine aspects of the book are balanced by many insights into the more intimate moments of life. Overall, the book shows only too clearly the hardships that came with living in the Kimberley not only as a "yella fella" but also as it was before air conditioning and bitumen roads made life much more manageable. Read against Bruce Shaw's life stories of Aboriginal stockmen, and books such as Connie Nungulla McDonald's *when you grow up*, it builds on the rich trove of personal information that Aboriginal people from the East Kimberley have shared with interested outsiders.

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