



Kimberley Society

Book Note

Keeping the Wanjinās Fresh by Valma Blundell and Donny Woolagoodja. [Fremantle Arts Centre Press](#), Fremantle, 2005. Soft Cover with photographs and colour plates, 293 pages. ISBN 1 920731687, RRP \$35.

This book will surely join the classics of literature about the Worora people of the Kimberley, such as Grey's *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in the North West of Western Australia*, Love's *Stone Age Bushmen of Today*, Crawford's *The Art of the Wandjina*, and McKenzie's *The Road to Mowanjum*. It provides the deepest insight so far into the history and culture of an Aboriginal people, the changes which have affected them over the past hundred years and the survival and adaptation of their traditional religious and cultural beliefs.

Valma Blundell is a Canadian anthropologist who has been visiting and studying the Worora and related peoples of the Mowanjum community for over thirty years. [Donny Woolagoodja](#) is the well known artist who came to fame as the maker of the "Olympic Games Wanjina" and who is also a highly respected leader elder and lawman of his community. Much of the narrative is based on conversations recorded over the years by Blundell from Donny's father Sam, himself a noted elder and lawman, Donny himself and others of Mowanjum. Many are recorded verbatim which adds both liveliness and authority to the story. The devastating effects of European intrusion, the move from the traditional homelands and the near extinction of the tribe are set down without traces of rancour through the eyes of Sam.

We are taken to Wanjina sites by Donny and Sam: the stories of the Wanjinās, their significance in the creation stories, their handing down of law and custom are detailed. This is a momentous sharing of ancient tribal lore with the outside world and an important gesture of reconciliation.

History is brought up to the present with the remarkable story of the renaissance of Wanjina art by the Worora and related groups at Mowanjum. Instead of the cave art, the old stories are being relived through the modern media of paint on canvas and paper and the intricate carving of pearl shell. This movement has brought recognition and enthusiasm by a world outside the Aboriginal community and some degree of financial reward, all without any outside grants or government aid. (Stunning colour plates illustrate the current movement; many of the pictures could be seen at the recent exhibition in the [Alexander Library](#).) More importantly, it has restored self respect to both individuals and their community: surely this is the first step in the social and health improvement which is so badly wanted and needed. The spirit of the Wanjina may yet prove to be a saviour.

As befits an academic work the appendices contain plentiful notes, references and bibliography. It is disappointing however to see an occasional misquotation and misinterpretation of source material. Blundell states that Grey failed to associate the paintings he saw in 1838 to local Aboriginal groups. This is untrue, In his *Journal* p. 253 (Facsimile edition, Hesperian Press) he writes in glowing terms of the "industry shown in the execution of some of their paintings and the careful finish of some articles of common use", though he does state that the origin of some "that may have been very ancient... must still be open to conjecture." Little has changed! Blundell's quotation from Grey does not apply to paintings but to the so-called carved head. Grey was right in not attributing this to the work of the Aborigines but wrong to attribute it to any other human agency. As Kimberley Society member [Peter Knight](#) found on Kevin Coate's 1983 expedition, the "carving" is caused by just a natural flaking of the sandstone. In Grey's defence at the time, he was suffering greatly from a spear wound in the thigh inflicted by a (likely) Worora ancestor.

Those looking for enlightenment on the nature, origin and significance of the Guyon Guyon (Bradshaw) paintings, may be disappointed, and the statement that they are on average "no more than thirty centimetres tall and mostly very faded" is surely wrong. Many are incredibly well preserved, especially as they are generally accepted as being tens of thousands of years old.

But these are minor quibbles, which do not detract from the importance of the work. Like any good book, questions and speculations are provoked in the reader. Will the talented group of younger artists at [Mowanjum](#) survive the epidemic of premature deaths that continues to devastate Aboriginal communities? And can the spirit of the Wanjina and the Wurnan, having survived or coexisted with a benign Presbyterianism, also survive the materialism, consumerism and all the other isms that beset all levels of society in Australia? Should or will the successive generations keep the cave Wanjinas fresh? If the spiritual meaning of many sites is now forgotten, should the sites be repainted or even visited at all? And what is the role of the wider Australian community in the preservation of this unique religious and cultural expression? (I suspect none). Can the optimism expressed in this book be sustained? We shall have to wait another fifty years to find out. As Grey wrote, while travelling in this region, "thought naturally throngs upon thought".

This book will have a wide appeal, not only for the general reader and young people of Mowanjum, as stated in the introduction, but also for the coastal tourist who wishes enlightenment on the nature and history of the country visited, the student of anthropology, those interested in Aboriginal art, native title and indeed anyone with an interest in the Kimberley. It is an essential for your bookshelf.

Hamish McGlashan

On 20 March 2005, at the Alexander Library Building ([the State Library](#)) in Perth, Challen & Rafferty Fine Art Gallery and Fremantle Art Centre Press held a combined art exhibition opening and book launch. Both the exhibition of Mowanjum Community artworks and the book by Valda Blundell and Donny Woolagoodja are titled *Keeping the Wanjinas Fresh*.

This event included a welcome to country by local elder Ted Hart, speeches by Roger Burgu (Mowanjum Elder), Ray Coffey (publisher), and both authors, and the actual launch and opening by Hon J C Kobelke (Minister for Indigenous Affairs). All this in front of a movie screen showing a film loop of Donny Woolagoodja visiting rock shelters and cruising past the magnificent features of his "Wanjina Country".

Following this was a *Joonba* (corroboree) especially to commemorate the event and Donny Woolagoodja's late father. The dance troupe consisted of about a dozen adults and half a dozen children and was led by Roger Burgu seated on the floor in a group of elders. I was delighted that one of the songs was about the story of Dumbi the owl and the great flood sent by the angry Wanjina Wanalirri. This had been a bedtime favourite of all my children who knew the story by heart. The dancing and singing complete with decorated banners was magnificent.

The associated display of Mowanjum art is stunning. The colours and vibrant Wanjinas belie the idea that rock art figures are static and fixed in stone. The quality and variety are excellent and I urge everyone to go to the State Library and enjoy this wonderful exhibition of Aboriginal Culture. It ends on 30 April.

Jack Vercoe