

## THE PROPER BAD LIE: MOOLA BULLA SCHOOL

On 5 June 2019, **Rhonda Povey** shared some of her research findings on western education at Moola Bulla with a Kimberley Society audience in Perth. Rhonda is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges at the University of Technology Sydney. Her summary of the talk appears below.

### Acknowledgement of country:

I wish to acknowledge and pay my respects to the Kija Jaru, Gooniyandi, Kukatja, Bunuba, Walmajarri people who resided at Moola Bulla Native Station between 1910 – 1955 on whose story this presentation is based. I would also like to acknowledge the people of the Noongar nation who are the traditional custodians of the land on which this paper was first presented. I pay my respects to Elders past and present.

### Cultural Warning:

This paper may contain images, names and the words of people who are now deceased.

### The Story of Moola Bulla Station

The old fellow who first told me about Moola Bulla was a Jaru man who at that time made a living selling his paintings. In his younger days he had been a stockman, and a proud one at that. He said he had worked on that one station, that Moola Bulla, for long-time without wages. He told me all about that station, how in 1910 Kija land had been taken over by the government to become an Aboriginal reserve.

Uncle said people were taken to there, from all over. He told me that Moola Bulla had been a ration or feeding station for Aboriginal people who had been dispossessed of their land. It was also a place for Aboriginal prisoners and a place where Aboriginal people who refused to 'sit down' were sent. Uncle told me lots of children were stolen from their families and taken to Moola Bulla. He'd been there as a kid too, and when I asked him about schooling, he had some 1 or 2 years maybe, not much, before he started work there, on Moola Bulla (Personal communication 2015).

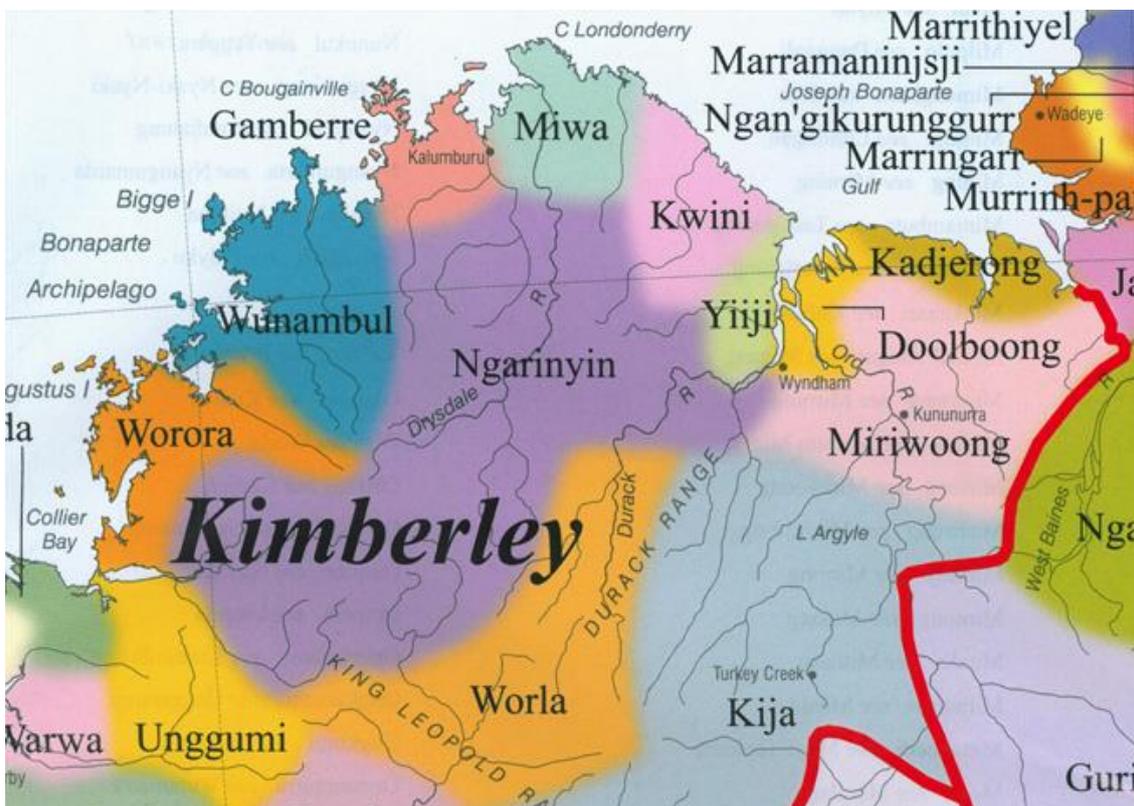


Figure 1: Map of traditional country in the Kimberley region, showing the traditional country of Moola Bulla ([www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-16/indigenous-language-map/8029486](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-16/indigenous-language-map/8029486))

Moola Bulla lies entirely within Kija country; that part of the country was then and still is known as Ngarrawanji (Farrer 1996). Moola Bulla Station was created on behalf of the pastoralists in response to cattle hustling by the local Aboriginal people who had been dispossessed of their land and traditional food sources. The idea of establishing a 'native feeding'<sup>1</sup> station was first raised in 1901 by the Fitzroy Telegraph Master, C.J Annear (Aborigines Department 1901) and then taken seriously when broached in 1907 by Police Commissioner Hare (Department of Aborigines and Fisheries 1909). Arrests for taking 'a killer' were increasing and Travelling Inspector Isdell reported to the Chief Protector of Aborigines "Our native gaols are full to overflowing" (Department of Aborigines and Fisheries 1909, p. 3).

No doubt so were the tensions increasing between pastoralists and Aboriginal communities who were often denied access to their country, as their traditional country became increasingly criss-crossed by pastoral boundaries.

In post-contact history, Moola Bulla was formerly Nicholson Plains, Greenvale and Mary Downs Station. The area was purchased by the Aborigines Department in 1910 and thereafter known as a 'Moola Bulla Cattle Station', a 'Native Station and Settlement', a 'Feeding Station' or a 'Native Station' (Clement 1989). Over the 45 years of its existence, Moola Bulla fulfilled several functions, as Uncle has described above. In 1955, Moola Bulla was sold and the 233 'inmates' as they were then called, evicted, given 48 hours to leave. The Aboriginal occupants, who were traditional owners and third generation residents were transported by road to the United Aboriginal Mission in Fitzroy Crossing, whilst others set up temporary camp outside the boundary of the station on the fringe of the newly established Halls Creek (Achoo 1996).

### **The children of Moola Bulla**

Many children lived on Moola Bulla between 1910 – 1955. Children were born on Moola Bulla, or "arrived to live there under a variety of circumstances, mostly beyond their control" (Povey and Trudgett 2019, p. 79). Some children were stolen from their families and country and removed to Moola Bulla, whilst other children already living at Moola Bulla were removed from their families. The removal of Indigenous children from their families has a long history stretching back to early days of colonisation (Hetherington 2002; Jebb 2002).

Government policies and practices impacted on the everyday lives of Aboriginal children in the East Kimberley. In 1905, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia became the legal guardian of all 'half-caste'<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal children, with an associated right for their removal, and police and protectors were instructed to collect all 'half caste' Kimberley children for placement in mission or institution (Choo 1997, p. 21). By 1910, when Moola Bulla was opened, Travelling Inspector Isdell was tasked to remove these children from Fitzroy Crossing and remove them to Moola Bulla (Choo 1997). The compulsory removal of Aboriginal children continued to intensify and in 1930 all removed children were sent to Moola Bulla; previously some were sent to Moore River, Forrest River and Beagle Bay (McDonald 2001). Children continued to be removed from their families and country and placed on Moola Bulla through to the closure of the school in 1955.

### **Aboriginal perspectives**

Research on which this paper is based explores the living experiences and perceptions of Aboriginal children being taken to Moola Bulla for schooling. Frank Byrne, interviewed by Charlie McAdam in 1995, recalls how his mother hid him from the Native Welfare Department the first time they came to steal him away to Moola Bulla:

*They come for me twice, the first time they come my mother rolled me up in a swag (Frank Byrne cited in McAdam and Tregenza 1995, p. 57).*

However, the second time,

*.... the manager he knew where I was and the next time they came back he came with them. So my mother, she had to let me go, like them other feller I suppose....(Frank Byrne cited in McAdam et al. 1995, p. 58).*

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper acknowledges the use deficit terminology is offensive, most especially to Indigenous people. The terms 'Native' and 'Feeding Station' are used only within an historical context.

<sup>2</sup> As in Footnote #1, this paper acknowledges that the use of racially biased language is offensive, most especially to Indigenous people. The terms 'half caste' and 'full blood' are only used within an historical context (see also Footnote #1).

While many children were stolen from family and country throughout the East Kimberley, some children were removed from their families when living at Moola Bulla. Many children lived with family in camp on the flat, or further away in the bush, often near the creek (Byrne, Coughlan and Gerard 2018). Ethel Walalgie was born on Moola Bulla and grew up there in the early 1950s. Her story was collected as part of the of the Moola Bulla Oral History Project run by the Kimberley Language Resource Centre:

*Long time I was born at MB and grew up there. but before we went to school we used to stay out in the bush with our grandfather at a place called Red Billabong ... My grandfather used to get a sugarbag for us, or goanna, that's how he used to grow us up, with our bushfood (Walalgie 1996, p. 178).*

The arms of the Native Welfare Department reached into the camps on Moola Bulla. Ethel was stolen from her grandfather's care:

*And after that the welfare<sup>3</sup> bloke came and said for us to come to school, come to school ... and then we was in the school now, we didn't go back to our grandfather (Walalgie 1996, p. 178).*

The theft of children from family and country as told here are just some of the stories; not all have been included in this current paper, however all storytellers interviewed in the research project have spoken of the living experiences of trauma of their removal.

Moola Bulla was a renowned adult prison, a place for punishment, control and surveillance. Oral histories and research interviews give accounts of imprisonment at Moola Bulla. Aunty Daisy was born at Cherrabun on Walmajarri country. Her father was arrested for leaving his job, sent to Moola Bulla for punishment. The family (mother, father and children) was transported to Fitzroy Crossing police station on the back of a truck:

*... the policeman came and picked up father because he'd run away (from a job) They put my father in jail .... Then we went to Moola Bulla to live. We stayed there for good. Me and my brothers and sisters grew up there and we forgot about our country (Andrews 1996, p. 148).*



Figure 2: Moola Bulla School 1952, showing students and teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Gill, standing in front of the bough shed school house (National Archives of Australia A1200/19).

---

<sup>3</sup> It is common practice in the Kimberley to refer to gubernatorial powers as 'welfare', whether they be agents of the Aborigines Department, the Department Native Affairs, Native Welfare Department or Travelling Inspectors. Note however that police are always identified eponymously.

A number of the families who lived in camps at Moola Bulla were the traditional owners of the land, the Kija people, others were extended families of older generations who themselves had been stolen (Byrne et al. 2018). Eileen Cox (nee Walalgie), a Kija woman, was born at Moola Bulla in 1946 and on her grandmother's country. Her father was a stockman and her mother a domestic servant who helped Mrs. George, the then manager's wife. Interviewed for the Moola Bulla Oral History Project, Aunty recalls:

*I can remember when I was about 5. We used to go to school there with Mr. and Mrs. Gill our teacher .... We used to live down the camp then ... My grandparents built that (house), and my mother and father and grandparents, and my aunty and uncle all used to live in that house (Cox 1996, p. 176).*

Children were also taken to Moola Bulla by their families, in search of a western education. Maggie a Jaru woman, was born at Turner River Station:

*Then up until 1937, I think it was about maybe 17 October when Dad decided to take us to school, to Moola Bulla. ...well dad took us to Moola Bulla himself. Actually, as I can remember, he took us in his own car, he took me and Mary and left us in Moola Bulla, trying to get an education back there. (Scott 1996, p. 126).*

Maggie's story, told to Therese Carr as part of the Moola Bulla Oral History Project, demonstrates her father's aspirations for western education for Maggie.

### **Aboriginal living experiences at Moola Bulla**

By and large, the living experiences of the circumstances of schooling for many children at Moola Bulla are stories of loss, trauma and hardship, yet not of victimhood; they are simultaneously, stories of great strength, survival, resilience and resistance. This is evident in the telling of their stories throughout this paper.

That Moola Bulla was inadequately prepared to care for the influx of children is evident throughout oral histories and testimonials given by the Moola Bulla Aboriginal community. Diet was limited and children relied on collecting their own bush tucker whenever possible (Povey et al. 2019). For many years, children were inadequately housed. Children slept outside and then under the main house to keep dry in the wet season. Aunty Maggie remembers:

*When we first went there they gave us one dress, government dress, you know, and one government blanket that had 'Government' written on it, and one government towel, and we used to sleep out in the backyard, you know ... (Scott 1996, p. 127).*



Figure 3: Blankets distributed on ration day at Moola Bulla. This photo clearly depicts the pauperisation of the Moola Bulla Aboriginal community (SLWA\_b4688011\_33).

When a dormitory was built in 1940 the girls were at least given shelter from the weather. Stolen generation girls were separated from the boys who stayed in the main camp. Aunt Jane sets down her living experiences of the little comfort provided to children:

*And we was in the dormitory, and we used to be lined up, you know laying down, no mattress those days just blankets ... No bed, just the floor we used to sleep on. We never used to have a bed there (Long 2018).*

The Bateman Survey of Native Affairs in 1948 is telling. Bateman's report showed a lack of any specific government policies or practices in education for Aboriginal children. Furthermore, it was an indictment of condition at Moola Bulla. Bateman argued "To refer to Moola Bulla as a native institution in its present run down state is palpably absurd" (Bateman 1948, p. 11) noting a lack of institutional buildings, poor quality staff quarters, and the absence of an adequate school building. It is salient to note here that Bateman's primary concern is not about the welfare of children, but about the conditions of Moola Bulla as an institution and the inadequate conditions provided for the staff and workers.

### **Moola Bulla School - A proper bad lie**

In the East Kimberley, Moola Bulla officially became the site for a government school in 1929. The proper bad lie is that schooling was available and being consistently delivered at Moola Bulla (Povey et al. 2019). This proper bad lie spread throughout the East Kimberley, yet, the school was only intermittently open - it operated for only 18 of the 45 years of the existence of Moola Bulla.

The proper bad lie of available schooling is potent when we consider children who were removed from family and or country, for schooling. As we have seen already, the abduction of children was frequent, sanctioned by police, Protectors of Aborigines, station managers and on occasions endorsed by non-Aboriginal fathers. This is the proper bad lie, that children were removed from family and/or country under the guise of attending school at Moola Bulla.

So impressive was this lie, some families either relocated so their children could attend school or sent their children to Moola Bulla specifically to gain a western education. We have already heard from Aunt Maggie whose father drove her to Moola Bulla for school. Also, though rare and often under duress, mothers took their children to Moola Bulla as the best of the limited and poor choices available to them, and with an expectation that their children would go to school. Aunt Flora's story is complex. Born at Flora Valley, she was taken to Moola Bulla to attend school. She told me:

*My mum first took us to, umm, Moola Bulla for schooling. After my father died ... then she decided to bring us to Moola Bulla for school. So Uncle bought us over to Moola Bulla and my mum, and they put us in ... she stayed with us for over a week, until 3 of us, 2 of my other sister and myself, til we settled down (Achoo 2018).*

By relinquishing their children, mothers believed their children would gain a western education and in a way that meant they could at least be able to ensure their children could remain on country and maintain strong connections with extended family who were a part of the existing Moola Bulla Aboriginal community. Yet as we have seen, families had educational aspirations and looked to Moola Bulla, mostly only to be thwarted.

Johnny Ross was born in 1940 at Alice Downs; he was stolen from his mother at a very early age (*Stolen Generation Testimonies: Johnny Ross 2009*). Johnny believes his non-Aboriginal father was complicit in his abduction:

*I was taken to Moola Bulla and I think my dad had a lot to do with that. They said he had a lot to do with it because they said he wanted to get me some education and things like that (Stolen Generation Testimonies: Johnny Ross 2009).*

Johnny's non-Aboriginal father endorsed the government policy of educating selected children. Once again, it is worth drawing attention firstly to the fact that Johnny was too young to attend school when he was abducted; secondly Moola Bulla school was closed in 1943 and reopened in 1950. In 1946 Johnny was transferred to Beagle Bay mission for schooling, after spending his early childhood living in poor conditions and separated from his mother. Johnny tells an important story, one that interrogates the benefits of child removal policy, especially under the auspices of western education. Johnny's story also reminds us of the capricious existence of many of the Moola Bulla community.

### **Conclusion**

A common thread across interviews and oral histories is deception; parents were told their children were being taken away the purpose of schooling, and that schooling was ongoing and consistently delivered. It is as I call it, a proper bad lie. The availability of teachers has been identified as the

biggest challenge to the consistent delivery of education (Rumley and Touissant 1990). This doesn't mediate the fact that children were surrendered or forcibly removed, sent for schooling to a cattle station that was under-resourced and ill-prepared to take on the responsibilities and accountabilities of the role of an institution for educating children.

## References

- Aborigines Department 1901, *Report for the financial year ending 30th June, 1901*, Government Printer, Perth, [AIATSIS digitised collection](#).
- Achoo, F. 2018, 'Western education at Moola Bulla: oral history project', Unpublished interview, Kimberley Language Resource Centre, Halls Creek.
- Andrews, D. 1996, 'Ai gon fo gud: I'm gone for good', in Kimberley Language Resource Centre, *Moola Bulla: in the shadow of the mountain: stories collected as a part of the Moola Bulla Oral History Project run by the Kimberley Language Resource Centre from 1987-1989*, Magabala Books, Broome, pp. 148-59.
- Bateman, F.E.A. 1948, *Report of the Survey of Native Affairs*, Government Printer, Perth, [AIATSIS digitised collection](#).
- Byrne, F., Coughlan, F. and Gerard, W. 2018, *Living in hope*, 2nd edn, Ptilotus Press, Alice Springs.
- Choo, C. 1997, 'The role of the Catholic missionaries at Beagle Bay in the removal of Aboriginal children from their families in the Kimberley region from the 1890s', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 21, pp. 14-29.
- Clement, C. 1989, *Historical notes relevant to impact stories of the East Kimberley: East Kimberley working paper No. 29*, Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Cox, E. 1996, 'My grandmother's country', in *Moola Bulla*, pp. 176-7.
- Department of Aborigines and Fisheries 1909, *Report of the Chief Protector of Aborigines for the year ending 30th June, 1909*, Government Printer, Perth, [AIATSIS digitised collection](#).
- Farrer, J. 1996, 'Our country', in *Moola Bulla*, p. 122.
- Hetherington, P. 2002, *Settlers, servants and slaves: Aboriginal and European children in nineteenth-century Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth.
- Jebb, M. 2002, *Blood, sweat and welfare: a history of white bosses and Aboriginal pastoral workers*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley.
- Kimberley Language Resource Centre 1996, *Moola Bulla: in the shadow of the mountain: stories collected as a part of the Moola Bulla Oral History Project run by the Kimberley Language Resource Centre from 1987-1989*, Magabala Books, Broome.
- Long, J. 2018, 'Western education at Moola Bulla: oral history project', Unpublished interview, Kimberley Language Resource Centre, Halls Creek.
- McAdam, C. and Tregenza, E. 1995, *Boundary lines*, McPhee Gribble, Ringwood.
- Long, J. 2018, 'Western education at Moola Bulla: oral history project', Unpublished interview, Kimberley Language Resource Centre, Halls Creek.
- McDonald, H. 2001, *Blood, bones and spirit: Aboriginal christianity in an East Kimberley town*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton.
- Povey, R. and Trudgett, M. 2019, 'There was movement at the station: western education at Moola Bulla, 1910-1955', *History of Education Review*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 75-90.
- Rumley, H. and Touissant, S. 1990, 'For their own benefit? A critical overview of Aboriginal policy and practice at Moola Bulla, East Kimberley, 1910-1955', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 14, no. 1-2, pp. 83-103.
- Scott, M. 1996, 'They came for punishment', in *Moola Bulla*, pp. 126-35.
- Stolen Generation Testimonies: Johnny Ross 2009, *Johnny Ross*, viewed 15 December 2017, [online](#).
- Walalgie, E. 1996, 'You finish school', in *Moola Bulla*, p. 178.